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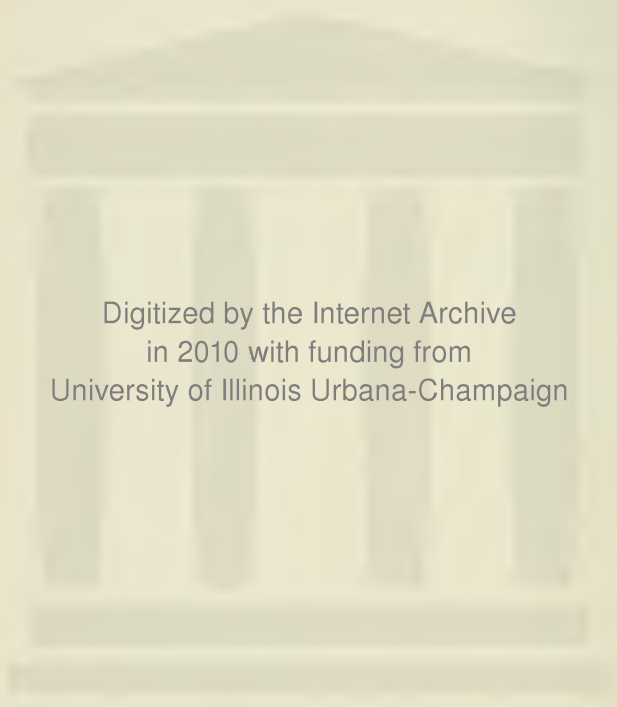
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PHŒBE'S FORTUNES



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PHŒBE'S FORTUNES

BY MRS. ROBERT O'REILLY

THREE VOLUMES.—III.



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I.—PHŒBE RISKS HER NECK.

PHŒBE'S thoughts were in a whirl as she set out on her walk through Calminster.

It was down the green Minster Lane that her father had come and gone, wooing her young mother, younger then than Phœbe herself was now. It was along this road where her own feet were treading, and had trod so often lately that she could have walked it blindfold, that her mother's feet had passed and re-passed daily. What was it that Miss May had said? She had wondered no Calminster girl had taken the fancy of

Harold Blunt? Ah, that was because Gideon had sent his child away, and Harold had followed her to Killock Haugh. Phœbe had a longing to see that place with the strange harsh-sounding name, heard for the first time that day, the place where her parents had been married. She pictured to herself Deborah coming home, and in at the white gate, and telling her tale, so wholly glad, and pleased, and proud, she had no time to be sad. But that time must have come later. The loving cares all at an end, the small house empty of its chief joy, the little hat hung up as a relic of the past, the one short year of hope and expectation, and then the tidings of the young wife's death. No wonder, Phœbe thought, that Deborah had been soured and made bitter by a trouble she must have blamed herself as having had some hand in.

And yet, was it only trouble? Was the brightest, happiest year in all her father's life to go for nothing in her thoughts of her young mother?

"And I know *how* happy he must have been. It was so exactly like him, to trouble himself not at all about the conventionalities of this place, but to be happy in his own way; and where *was* the harm? Oh, I am glad, darling, I was born to be some comfort to you when you lost her," said Phœbe, talking to her father in her thoughts, as she often did, her eyes full of tears called up by thinking of his sorrow, ever so long, long ago now.

And then her own coming to Calminster. The trial it must have been to Deborah to see her now and then, to know she was always near, within reach daily, and yet as far away as ever for any good or comfort her presence could ever be—Deborah not so patient

as her grandfather, and longing sorely for a word of love from "Phœbe's girl."

"Reared my mother, sick unto death now, and fretting grievously to see me."

Phœbe repeated the words to herself, and each time she did so, felt more and more inclined to turn back to the Minster Lane, to nurse Deborah through this illness, and be the stay and support of the declining years of those who had cherished her mother's youth.

"Give duty and affection *wherever* they are due—even as *you have given them to me.*"

Her father's words bore a new meaning at last. By the sacred pledge they mentioned, as surely as she *had* loved him, had been dutiful to him, she would fulfil his wishes now.

"I am so well off," she thought,—and indeed the sum at that moment due to her from her employers would have

represented a fortune in the eyes of her grandfather,—“even if I did undertake the nursing myself, I can afford a holiday, and keep away from my pupils until all fear of infection is over. After that my teaching will keep them all in comfort,—that and the garden, even if we are obliged to hire a labourer for it,”—Phœbe was already beginning to identify herself with the concerns of the family at the cottage,—“and yet,” so her thoughts ran on, “for fear of losing my pupils altogether, it might be better to pay a nurse from the Infirmary; but then—‘fretting grievously to see me.’ I hardly see what it is best to do. I shall be glad of one quiet night at home to turn it all over in my mind. I only know they are my charge now, and always for all the days to come, and *how* good and unselfish he has been—my wise, patient grandfather.”

Walking quickly, and too full of thought to notice any one she passed, or who passed her, or what went on around her, Phœbe did not see Frank Lister ride by on one of Sir John's horses, and in company with some of the party staying at the Grange. Frank saw her, tried in vain to catch her eye, and win a greeting from her in acknowledgment of his own, and wondered what she could be thinking of so earnestly, that she should be so preoccupied, hold her head so erect, and have in her whole manner and bearing such an odd little air of determined resolution.

“They must not object to my being often at the cottage now, at least when this sickness is over,” Phœbe thought, as she pushed back the gate of Meadowthorn House, passed up the avenue, and went on round the corner of the house to the garden entrance. “I need never take

Avice with me. Though they are all my cousins—poor little Fib! how odd it sounds!—they are of course nothing to each other. Dear me, I am sorry for my aunt all this time! It must have been a trial to her to know to whom I belonged, and who had a claim upon me beside themselves.” Phœbe was quite ready to sympathise with *any* trial to others, even with one so alien to her own nature as was this.

Only Tim and his mother were in the parlour when her bright face appeared at the window.

“Where have you been?” cried Tim, throwing down his book and stretching himself.

“Detained about your practice for the concert, I suppose. Mr. Lister was sure that was the case. You had luncheon at the Deanery, of course, Phœbe, or with the Miss Bartrams? I gave no orders

about keeping anything hot for you, when Tim came back and said you were not in Grove Street. And have you heard—of course you have though—of this new idea of Lady Bartram's, that you should live with her? Mr. Lister was speaking of it. He thought it a good thing; and, for the matter of that, I don't think her ladyship is the only person who has taken a fancy to have you live with them, and you *can't* be blind, Phœbe, whatever you may pretend; but don't imagine I mean to advise you, for I know by this time you will go your own way and no one else's," and Mrs. Blunt paused at last quite out of breath.

Her own way? Yes, and that must lead her far from the Grange—far, perhaps, from that other possibility that her aunt had vaguely hinted at, and by so doing had called up a rosy blush upon the soft cheek, and a light into the eyes that

fell at once before the sharp curious glances directed towards them. For the first time it dawned upon Phœbe that the shadows *might* be flitting and changing, that a new page might be turning for her, and this one that had grown to be such pleasant reading might have come suddenly to an end. Her thoughts had really been so much and so entirely engrossed with the discovery of that morning that it was no affectation on her part, but the simple fact, that, for the moment, she quite forgot no one yet knew she had discovered anything at all; and when Tim said again, "Where have you been?" she answered, "To the Minster Lane. Deborah has diphtheria, and my grandfather sent for me."

"Whew!"

Tim gave a prolonged whistle, stopped suddenly on his way to the greenhouse, through which he was about

to pass to join his cousin on the lawn, and looked from her face, framed in the open window, to that of his mother, who had risen from her seat and stood confronting her niece.

Mrs. Blunt was scarlet with indignation.

"Your—grandfather—sent—for—you," she repeated slowly, pausing between each word.

"Yes; I know now who he is. I think it is such a pity I did not know sooner. They are in great trouble and distress, or he would not have sent for me to-day," Phœbe said quietly.

"And you went! Come away from her, Tim! I won't have you go near her—either of you, you or Avice. As if Avice was not ill enough already! Have you *no* consideration, Phœbe? I declare I should have thought even you would have known better than to go to such an

infectious thing as that, and then come here."

"I did not see her. Of course I did not go into the room."

"You went into the house."

"Only to speak to my grandfather in the lower room. He would not allow me to run any risk, as I was coming straight here."

Mrs Blunt would not even hear the repetition of the word so obnoxious to her; she preferred to speak of Deborah's illness, and to ascribe to dread of that the indignation only too apparent in her looks and tone.

"It was enough, and more than enough, to take diphtheria yourself and spread the mischief. Wherever else you are going, Phœbe, you are *not* going upstairs in this house, to carry it to the very room of your poor little cousin, whom you pretend to care for. And as

for the wedding ! Well, of all provoking, thankless girls, throwing away opportunities, and flying in the face of Providence——”

Mrs. Blunt broke off. Perhaps she could not trust herself to continue speaking.

“ I had half thought of going back to nurse her,—but you do not mean I must go at once ? Not sleep here to-night—not come into the house at all ? ”

“ I do mean it.”

Phœbe thought of Avice, the child she had learnt to love so dearly, thought too of David Edwards, “ dead in three days.” Perhaps her aunt was right.

“ I would not bring harm to Avice for the world,” she said softly. “ If you think the mischief is done already, the risk run, and that I could carry the infection even now, I will go away at once, and not come back until it is quite, quite safe.”

“Time enough to talk of coming back. It’s an easy house to get *out* of, Phœbe, this house that took you in when no other was open to you. I hope you’ll enjoy yourself in the Minster Lane.”

Mrs. Blunt spoke with such suppressed anger in her voice, her niece looked at her in amazement.

“It won’t make any difference, dear aunt.”

The tone, as sweet as ever, and with not even a shade of vexation in its accents, failed to soften Mrs. Blunt.

“What won’t make a difference?” she asked sharply.

“My knowing Gideon is my grandfather.”

“It *will* make a difference. Do you want to eat your cake, and have it too, and throw it away, all at once?” No one knew what Mrs. Blunt meant by this dark saying; it is even doubtful whether

she knew herself. “Your things shall be put outside the door, Phœbe, and you may go your own way, and as for coming back——” Again she broke off abruptly, and went to the bell and rang violently. She was half beside herself with anger. Would Frank Lister think of Phœbe now? Of course he would not! Though if she would only hold her tongue about these inconvenient relations of hers till he had committed himself, all might be well. But *would* she hold her tongue? would she do anything that was expected of her, in the way of keeping up appearances?

Phœbe, leaning against the window-sill, exchanged a glance with Tim, and felt a little comforted to meet the old roguish look, and yet was half aware of a new look of respect in the boy's honest eyes that comforted her still more. Then her glance wandered round the familiar

room. The music she had stitched for Frank was gone from the top of the piano where she had left it lying. He had been then. And she would not see him at the wedding, for of course that must be given up. When Jane answered the bell, and her aunt bade Phœbe give her orders through the window, the first thing the girl said was,—

“I suppose I could find a good nurse at the Infirmary?”

“Possibly,” Mrs. Blunt answered.

“It might be better,—she might even do better than I could myself for Deborah.”

“She might. I know nothing about that.”

“And if I go there now, without any further time for thought, it will be settled finally, for once having seen her I cannot come here or anywhere else until it is safe again.”

“You should have thought of that before. You never should have gone there in the first instance.”

Mrs. Blunt was quite aware that in banishing Phœbe now she was forcing her to banish herself for an indefinite time. Perhaps it suited her that this should be the case, for when Tim made some suggestion with regard to his cousin performing quarantine in the spare room, his mother silenced him at once, bidding him remember how ill Avice had already been, and telling him he knew nothing of the terribly infectious nature of this complaint Phœbe seemed bent upon bringing amongst them. She could go to Grove Street, Mrs. Blunt suggested, the back room there was vacant; for her part she was far from wishing her to go to the Minster Lane at all, but they all knew Phœbe was not one to be guided, but considered she was her own mistress;

still Grove Street was there, if she only chose to take advice. Phœbe was glad to put an end to the flow of bitter words by giving Jane her directions, and going herself to find the garden-boy to wheel her trunk for her in the barrow to—Phœbe hardly knew yet, to where.

She could not but feel a little desolate and lost when, walking slowly down the road in the afternoon sunshine, it became clear to her that she had nowhere to go at all, and was quite turned out upon the world, nowhere at least but the humble home of her grandfather. For Mrs. Simmons had a delicate baby of her own, and Phœbe would not go to Grove Street to bring terror there. Indeed, she was beginning to feel alarmed herself. Would every one be so much afraid of this strange malady as Mrs. Blunt had declared herself to be? Would she lose her pupils? Her little fortune, which

she thought so proudly of an hour ago, must be carefully hoarded if she were forced to be long idle. People might even supply her place and get another teacher. At all events, she did not dare now go even to their doors to account for her absence and ask for the necessary holiday. Should she call in Grove Street and beg her uncle to send messages round to the Miss Bartrams, the Deanery, young Mrs. Wold, and the one or two other families where she taught? Then, what comforts would it be best to take at once to Deborah? She felt troubled and worried, weary too, and, though last by no means least, hungry. She had to make an effort and to scold herself a little to keep back the tears that threatened to fall, and then—the thoughts never long absent from her mind came back, the things that had all her life been real to her took their

proper place once more. Standing still for a moment, Phœbe lifted up her heart to her true Home, the tears changed to smiles, and some one looking at her just then said to himself, "Can *nothing* trouble her, I wonder?" for her face was as bright as ever, the calm, fair brow serene and unruffled.

The same one was Tim, seated in his mother's pony-carriage, with Phœbe's box at his feet, and presently he laughed aloud to see her, quite unaware of his presence, turn to look back upon the road, evidently wondering what had become of the wheel-barrow and the garden-boy and her small properties. The laugh attracted her attention.

"Why, Tim!"

"At your service," cried the boy, touching his cap and guiding the rat-tailed pony to the footpath, where he

drew up. "Come, cousin, jump in. I'll drive you where you please."

"But your mother—may you drive me, Tim?"

"Oh, yes: in fact she sent me. In the open air, you know, Phœbe, not even grandfathers are catching."

Phœbe could not help laughing.

"Oh, Tim," she said, as she climbed into the carriage beside him, a work of some difficulty, owing to a disinclination on the part of the pony to stand still, and a still more pronounced disinclination on the part of Phœbe to have her toes pinched by the wheels—"oh, Tim, it has come to this—I am a young woman and a box once more, and nothing else. Do you remember how I first raised and then disappointed your expectations on that wet evening long ago?"

"You have raised them and disappointed them many a time since then,

and never more so than just now. Miss Bartram's wedding, the Grange, your fine London friend at last, and not above being our friend too, and then, hey, presto! change, as by magic, to the sick old woman in the Minster Lane, and old Gideon Fagge, the gardener—I beg your pardon, Phœbe, your respected grandpapa, I should say.”

“What a pity it is to make a fuss about it!” Phœbe said, leaning back at her ease, and very glad to rest and be driven smoothly along the pleasant road; “as if one's grandfather mattered in the least!”

“It seems to matter to you,” Tim said, in some surprise. “I've always wondered how you'd take it when you'd found it out. The costermonger's daughter must be your first cousin, Phœbe.”

“Yes; I understand now your mother's consternation when Fib came. But you

don't mean to tell me *you* knew this all along."

"Two and two—if you put them together, not unless—make four. I've seen them separately, and puzzled over them, and added them up at last; but that which is only found out by the unassisted efforts of one's own genius one is never bound to tell," and Tim flicked the pony with the whip, feeling bound to show off his skill as a Jehu, for the Grange carriage passed them at the moment.

Cecy and Grace were in it, and kissed their hands to Phœbe.

"Cecy will go back in her music, she needs a teacher constantly to keep up her practice; and Grace will get more than ever entangled in her moods and tenses, and forget her irregular verbs completely, if the illness is a long one," said the young governess, puckering up her forehead into a frown.

“Is *that* all you think of?” said Tim.

“What else should I think of?”

“The difference between ‘genteel society’ and that in the Minster Lane—the way in which the Bartrams and everyone else will look down upon you now. You don’t expect to keep up your ‘excellent connection’ now, Phœbe do you?”

“Why not? Oh, Tim, what a mistake your mother makes! I know the ways of the world.” Phœbe shook her pretty head with an air of wondrous wisdom, as though she knew the world very thoroughly indeed. “There is so great a difference already,” she went on, “between employers and employed, that a little more or less is of no consequence at all. It is what I can do, what I can give them in return for the wages they give me, that they think of,—not of who I am, for, being already ‘nobody,’ how can I be less than that?”

“A good education, such as my father gave me, is such a blessing,” Phœbe resumed, after a moment’s pause. “I know, of course, if I had come amongst these people at the first as Gideon’s grandchild only, I should have found it hard to work my way up so quickly, though I should have done it even then in time; but I am not in the least afraid of losing my connection now it is once made. It will not matter, Tim, the very least in all the world to the Bartrams, or to people of their standing, who my grandfather may be—oh, not there, Tim, not to Grove Street,” she interrupted herself as the pony’s head was turned towards the shop.

“Why not?”

“Think of poor Mrs. Simmons; she would be quite as frightened as your mother was, and her child is as precious to her as Avice is to us—and, Tim, I

don't think I care to see my uncle to-day. It's done now, you know, and can't be helped, and you will take my messages, I'm sure. Oh, and, Tim, please drive to the grocer's. I want wine, and arrow-root, and things; and to the tin-man's too, there's a kind of saucepan I must get,—I'm sure they have not one of the sort I mean in the Minster Lane; and then to the butcher's, I want beef for beef-tea."

"What am I to say—what messages to give, I mean?" Tim asked, as he turned the pony-carriage round and nearly upset it, and pretended that nothing had gone wrong at all, and would not even see how tightly Phœbe held on to the side, or hear the little scream she gave, but sat very upright, and cracked his whip, and whistled, though his face was scarlet, and in his secret soul Master Timothy was surprised to find himself

and Phœbe and the rat-tailed pony still in their proper places, and not mixed up together in confusion on the ground.

“What is it I am to say for you?”

“That I have gone to nurse a sick friend, and, as the illness is infectious, would not call myself. Ask for a holiday for me, and speak prettily, as you can do, Tim, when you choose,” Phœbe answered, having had time now to think what it was best to do and say in this crisis that had come upon her so suddenly.

“Then I am not to mention where you are really gone?”

“Of course you are to mention it to any one who shows interest enough in me to ask you questions. But you have a bad idea of mental perspective, cousin. Our own affairs occupy the foreground only from our own point of view. I don't imagine you will be asked anything beyond how long I am likely to be away.”

They had quite a merry shopping in the High Street. The little carriage grew full of Phœbe's parcels. Finding how hungry she was, Tim stopped at the confectioner's and gallantly treated her to luncheon. While she ate it she gave him many charges about Avice.

"Be good to her, and do not let her miss me more than you can help. I am glad it is the holidays now, so that you can be as much with her as you like. And be sure you never come near me at all, to frighten aunt, and make bad worse," she said.

When they set out again, the pony was not only so much refreshed by the short rest, but appeared possessed by such a fixed idea that it was time to go home, and that they *could* be going nowhere else, that it was well Phœbe had said all she wished to say while Tim was at leisure to listen. He was not at leisure

now. The pony claimed all his attention. Twice they turned gaily round and started at full speed in the wrong direction, and at the corner of the Minster Lane itself there was a pitched battle between the wilful little animal and his inexperienced driver, who would have died rather than own he *was* inexperienced, and made ludicrous efforts to maintain a conversation upon indifferent subjects while his arms were half pulled off, and his mind weighed down with a sense of responsibility with regard to Phœbe's neck, to say nothing of her parcels, which threatened to fly out every moment.

“He's very fresh to-day,” Phœbe ventured to observe, as she clasped a wine bottle to her lovingly, and set her foot firmly upon a packet of groceries to keep it steady, and held on with one hand, and felt a little alarmed and not a little amused.

“Only in good spirits,” Tim answered, giving a great jerk to the reins, and standing up to slash the pony with the whip, whereupon it put down its head and tore down the lane, Tim swaying violently, and only saved from being thrown out by Phœbe, who pulled him into his seat, and then, to save his dignity, looked as though she had not done it, and remarked breathlessly that the trees were very green.


It was all Tim could do to pull up at the gate, and when he did it, it was with a clatter, and scrimmage, and confusion altogether, that made Fib, standing some way off, stare aghast, brought Gideon to the door, and caused the sick woman in the upper room to turn her head uneasily on the pillow, and wonder what could possibly be going on in that neighbourhood, usually so quiet that the sound of wheels was rare.

Phœbe was very glad to find herself on her feet, and fervently hoped Tim would reach home in safety. She would not let him pass the gate, or do more than lift out her box, hand to her her many parcels, and leave her standing there with both arms full, nodding and smiling to him as he drove away.





II.—IN THE MINSTER LANE.

“UNT DEBORAH, I am come to nurse you.”

The sick woman lying with closed eyes opened them to see Phœbe standing by the bed.

The afternoon sun streamed in at the window. The small room, clean and neat as hands could make it, with white-washed walls and spotless floor, was one glare of light. Phœbe went over to the window, and pinned up before it her own dark shawl, softening the blaze of sunshine. Then she moved softly about the shaded room, and made one or two arrangements for the comfort of her

patient. She hardly thought her first words had been understood, but went on speaking in low, hushed tones, so that Deborah might grow accustomed to the idea of her presence, and not be agitated or excited more than could be helped.

“You must be very good,” Phœbe said; “sick people have to obey their nurses always. Do you know, I am going to scold you a little? It was too bad never to tell me this was my mother’s home, and that it was you who had brought her up—poor me, who so often longed to hear who she was, or anything about her. But it is all right now, and I promise not to scold any more if you do what I tell you, and take everything I bring you. By-and-by, when your poor throat is well, and you can talk again, you must tell me so many things; whether my mother gave you much trouble, or was always good and obe-

dient; which was the room she slept in; did she look out of this window every morning, I wonder, and kneel down here by the white bed to say her prayers at night?"

Great tears were rolling down Deborah's cheeks, as she followed with her eyes the girl's every movement. She stretched her hand out as Phœbe drew near, and took hold of her dress.

"Happen she growed like you, and spoke as you do, and dressed the same way. I never seed her since she was a lady. It's been hard to have Phœbe's girl about, and never hear her call me aunt," she said, in her poor, weak, husky voice.

"It is not going to be hard any longer. I am to stay here and nurse you till you get quite well," Phœbe's own voice shook.

"But you ain't no business to stay

here! You hadn't ought for to have come nigh the place;" Deborah tried to push the girl from her.

"I have no business anywhere else just now. Indeed, you must let me stay."

So ready always to think offence was meant, so quick to take it, "firing up" so easily, as Gideon said, the sick woman threw up her hands with an angry gesture, and called out huskily,—

"Turned you out, have they? Mr. Edmund did say 'twould stand in your light. So they've turned you out. Just like 'em."

Even then Phœbe could not help a little feeling of amusement at the thought how nearly Deborah had touched the truth, though relieved that she could give an explanation the force of which her patient was quick to acknowledge. Deborah said, more gently, she would be "main hurt"

if harm came to little missie; and then, with a new anxiety written on her troubled face, began to speak of Don, to fear that, through her, any ill should befall the child; to exclaim that Phœbe herself would sicken, and to wring her hands and moan, and toss from side to side in her distress, and, in fact, to "take things hard through not being peaceful in her mind," as Gideon had said it was her way to do at all times. Phœbe found it difficult to soothe or quiet her, till at last she took up the prayer-book which lay on a chair beside the bed, and read of those who "abide under the shadow of the Almighty," those who "shall not be afraid of any terror by night, nor of the sickness that slayeth in the noonday," and finding that Deborah lay still to listen, went on with one psalm after another in her low, tender, reverent voice. By-and-by the strained, worn look

passed away from the sick woman's face. She put her hand to her throat, and Phœbe, giving her the remedy provided, laid her finger on her lips, and said speaking was forbidden, and sat by her, still reading now and then a verse or two, but for the most part silent, until Deborah fell at last into an uneasy slumber.

It was very quiet then in the little room, where everything seemed like a dream to Phœbe. Now and then she heard Gideon's voice below, speaking to the lad already hired to see after the garden. Gideon had known of one who would be glad of the job, and Phœbe, before she had entered Deborah's room at all, had not only sent for him, and made her bargain with him, but had arranged for Fib and Don to be taken in at the last cottage in the lane, where an old couple without children, for a trifle

paid for their board, were glad to receive them.

She sat motionless for some time, watching the patch of sunlight that crept in at the corner of the window where the shawl hung crookedly, and which changed its place from the wall behind the bed, nearer and nearer to the door, and changed its colour too, for by-and-by, owing to the rosy flush upon the white wall, Phœbe knew the sun must be setting. She went down the narrow stair then, and found her grandfather awkwardly preparing tea, and laughed at him for attempting "woman's work," and set the things herself, seeming to know by instinct where to find them all, and touching reverently and fondly the little pink and gold cup that had been her mother's once, and which Gideon insisted upon her using. She told Gideon how she used to do this and all household

tasks for her father after their change of fortune, so that it was nothing new or hard to her to do it now. She prattled to him gaily, asking him endless questions about her mother, and even more questions still about her father, and had he a picture of her mother? Phœbe said at last.

“Ay: I have one now,” said Gideon, and made her turn her head to meet her own eyes in the cracked glass over the chimney-piece, the glass at which Deborah used to put her cap in order.

Later in the evening Phœbe read to the old man from the big Bible, in the fly-leaf of which her mother's name was written, and was full of tender pity when, the reading over, he made her turn to the old place and read the story he never tired of hearing, and listened to it with his eyes fixed upon the white gate through which he looked daily and nightly to see his prodigal return.

“The wall-flower man! how odd it all is,” Phœbe thought to herself; “how wonderfully we have all been brought together!”

She was content and glad that it should be so,—young enough to find it almost as good as play to be mistress of the little cottage, tyrant and ruler over the sick room. When she woke next morning, Deborah having, towards dawn, fallen into a long sleep, which had allowed her nurse to rest also, Phœbe felt as though she had been years and years in the Minster Lane already. The strange, dream-like sensation, which is strong upon us after any sudden change, the feeling that the totally new present was present always, and the long, long familiar past was the unreality and the shadow, was strong with her. It seemed to her that she had every morning of her life come out into the fresh, dewy garden,

where the lad was gathering the fruit and vegetables supplied regularly by Gideon to the principal green-grocer in the High Street, Gideon having in his way quite as good a connection as Phœbe had in hers. She smiled to remember how she had once told Tim that life could be very happy in the picturesque little house, looking like a house in a story-book, and how he had laughed at her for saying she should enjoy taking the fruit and flowers to market. She did not quite do that, but in the intervals of her nursing and her household tasks, Phœbe raked and weeded, under her grandfather's direction, and was so useful, and was so handy, and showed such a decided talent for gardening, that Gideon was fairly delighted.

She saw no one else, except Fib coming backwards and forwards—but never any further than the gate, for Phœbe maintained a rigorous quarantine—with the

messages on which she was sent into the town ; and little Don, very far off indeed, kissing his hand in the distance ; and the doctor, who was exceedingly surprised to find her there, and pleased to have his patient in such good hands. It appeared as if her friends in Calminster had forgotten her existence. Remembering how far apart Meadowthorn House and the Minster Lane were figuratively, if not really,—and even in reality it was some distance between the two,—Phoebe knew she might live thus for months and months and never see anything at all of the people who had composed her world—only yesterday. She had little time, however, to think of herself, a process never habitual with her, for Deborah continued very ill.

“We shall not save her. It is not only a bad case, but her temperament is too restless, anxious, worrying, to give her a

fair chance," the doctor said, wondering who Phœbe was, and taking her for some philanthropic young lady with a turn for nursing.

When, in answer to his question, Gideon replied that the young lady was his granddaughter, the doctor's wonder was depicted upon his countenance.

"How does that come about?" he asked.

"As it mostly do, far as I ever heard—along of her being the child of my child," said Gideon, dryly.

Under the quieting influence of Phœbe's nursing, Deborah became more quiet herself. No invalid, rich or poor, could be more tenderly cared for than she was now. If, in the days when Phœbe had come and gone as a stranger, in the house where her mother had been brought up from childhood, Deborah had hungered for a word from her, she was, or ought to

have been, fully satisfied at last. And she seemed satisfied. Her eyes followed the girl about the room; in all her own pain and weakness, Phœbe being near her, she was content and patient.

“It seems all real like to you,” she said once, though speech had become so painful she said very little at all now.

Phœbe had been reading the description of heaven in the Revelations.

“Isn’t it real to you too?” she asked rather sadly.

“I’ve had a hard life—it have been dark at times.”

“But not now. How can it be dark where He is—the true light?”

“No, it ain’t dark now,” the sick woman answered, smiling, “not since you come.”

On the second day Mr. Blunt walked down the lane and stood looking over the gate.

Phœbe did not see him for a minute or two. She was very busy gardening. She wore a large coarse apron belonging to Deborah tied over her dress, a thick pair of gloves of Gideon's,—great leather things he used when pruning,—and, on her head, her mother's old straw hat. Thus equipped, she was waging fierce war upon the thistles that had basely taken advantage of Gideon's rheumatics to invade the little domain, once a very pattern of neatness and order. Now and then Phœbe glanced up at the window of the sick-room, where the white curtain stirred in the soft air; once she began to sing, then laughed a little at the antics of the kittens which followed her about everywhere: then, as she stood upright to rest herself for a moment, she caught sight of her uncle. She came towards him at once with a smile of welcome, stopping, however, before she

reached the gate, and not offering to shake hands.

"This is a mad freak of yours, Phœbe," he began.

"Remember 'glass houses,' uncle," she said saucily, being quite sorry for him and wishing to put him at his ease, and so sure he must be vexed now to think how he had deceived and tricked her; "you should not have come here yourself; my aunt will be frightened. How is Avice?"

"Much as when you left her. She misses you—we all do that."

"All?" Phœbe had her doubts upon the point, but did not of course express them. She only cautioned her uncle to stand in such a position that the air—the little there was of it—should blow from him to her, and was rather amused when he instantly and scrupulously obeyed her.

“What do you suppose your pupils will say? Do you expect to keep them?”

“I hope so,” Phœbe answered, thinking how she would need them more than ever.

“People are so much afraid of infection?”

“I shall not go near them until I am disinfected, or, if all trades fail, and I cannot keep my pupils, I might turn to nursing altogether. The little parish doctor would find me work enough. You have no idea what compliments he pays me, or how surprised he seems that a young lady should have either the use of her hands or a head on her shoulders, and it seems quite a treat to the poor man to have his directions understood and properly carried out.”

“It was a very hare-brained piece of business!

Edmund Blunt tapped the gate impatiently with his stick, and looked gloomily at his niece. He would not smile at her prattle. He looked round uneasily to discover whether Gideon were near, or likely to overhear what they said, or likely to come and speak to him.

“A very hare-brained piece of business indeed!” he repeated.

“It need not have been. If I had known sooner the* claim they have upon me here,—a strong claim, uncle,—I might have provided against this. I might have stayed away from all risk myself, and have sent some one in my place now, but that she fretted so sorely to see me, fearing to die with the words unspoken, that, indeed, it would have been better had they been spoken earlier,” she said gently.

“You don’t see things quite as we

do, Phœbe." (Indeed she did not!) "If you would have been content to know it only. But your aunt felt sure that you would always be speaking of it, that you would not be satisfied with coming here occasionally, that you would not——" the stationer seemed awkwardly at a loss for words. Phœbe supplied them for him.

"That I should not have been ashamed of my grandfather, you mean. No, I do not think I should," she observed, quietly.

"I always thought myself that you ought to have been told—to have had your choice; but your aunt, you must see, Phœbe, that I was bound to consider her."

There was a pause, during which Mr. Blunt looked intently upon all Phœbe's surroundings, from the coarse gloves, in the depths of which the little hands were quite lost, to the roof of the humble

cottage festooned with creepers, the roof for whose shelter she had exchanged that of Meadowthorn House, and wondered whether she regretted the change which in his eyes was so great a matter, —in hers so trifling a one.

“Can I do anything for you?” he asked presently.

“Indeed, dear uncle, you can do one thing if you will, and that is, not speak, or look, as though you were displeased with me. And never think me ungrateful for all your kindness, even if I *have* to turn to the “humbler way of life” which you remember my father said might be open to me. I have been so happy with you all—don’t look as if you were angry with me now.”

“You are not dreaming of stopping here entirely—you are coming back again?” he said, unable to resist the influence of her sweet temper.

“That must be as my aunt pleases.”

Phoebe's misgivings as to her future relations with Mrs. Blunt had strengthened the more she had thought over their last interview.

“It must be as she pleases, and I have a plan of my own which I shall tell you by-and-by. For, indeed, you must be very kind to me still,—I shall need you still; you must not flatter yourself you have got rid of me for good and all, or handed me over entirely to my grandfather.”

She would not allow him to stay longer, but sent him away with many friendly words, and with loving messages to Avise, and comical messages to Tim, and stood in the gateway waving her hand until he was out of sight; and, if he could have looked into her heart, or read her thoughts just then, Mr. Blunt might have been surprised, for her thoughts ran like this,—

“How well everything turns out! How wonderfully things ‘work together for good!’ He loves Avice, and she softens him so much; and now with me away, and not standing between them any more, they will all be drawn nearer to each other for her sake. And they want me so dreadfully here, and till they *did* want me I never knew the claim they had. It is *so* beautiful! To take only one step always, and to be led right, however blind we may be ourselves. But I hope it will not be too hot a day for the wedding, and that they will take care of my child, and not let her tire herself.” With which hope Phœbe went back to her thistles, and did a good morning’s work amongst them.

As for Mr. Blunt, he walked back to Grove Street feeling far more at ease than when he had set out from it an hour before. Not one word of remonstrance

as to his unworthy silence had been addressed to him. His niece looked as content and cheerful as he ever remembered to have seen her, and not offended with him in the least. He had not even heard those awkward questions he had dreaded hearing, and with answers to which he had come prepared—questions regarding the false impression under which he had allowed his brother to remain. For it was true that, having told Harold of the distant appointment he had heard of for Gideon, he had permitted him to imagine that the old man had left Calminster, and had been gradually lost sight of altogether. But Phœbe had asked him nothing of all this. There had been no necessity for explanation or self-justification on his part.

The truth was, that Phœbe had settled the question with herself before they met; had decided, with the true wisdom

of a charitable, loving heart, that recriminations were worse than useless, that it was best to take things as she found them, accept the present situation of affairs, and go straight on, on her own path, clear enough and plainly marked out now. What Gideon had forgiven and borne with patiently she would think of no more, and her uncle had been very good to her, she said to herself, and she had learnt to love him.

Mr. Blunt had grown very fond of Phœbe himself. It had been a shock to him to be told by Tim, bluntly, and with no sort of preparation, that she had been "turned out." When he heard particulars, there had been quite a scene. Avice had fretted for her cousin. All the following day he could not bring himself to go near Phœbe, but, coming home at evening to find things more comfortable, Avice apparently resigned, and willing

to accept Tim as a substitute for Phœbe, and so glad to creep into her father's arms, and cling to him, and Mrs. Blunt talking cheerfully once more of the coming festivities at Miss Bartram's wedding, he had felt it possible to face his niece.

Tim, in answer to the messages with which he had been entrusted by his cousin, brought back from every one the satisfactory assurance that they were glad to wait, for Miss Blunt was well worth waiting for. No one would dream of supplying her place. No one grudged her a holiday, though every one said it was a pity it should be so sad a one, and spent in so dull a manner. Moreover, Phœbe had been right—no one questioned Tim as to where she had gone. Cecy Bartram, however, sent word that Miss Blunt's little cousin must not be disappointed, and that she herself would take care of her at the wedding, which kind

message was enough to account for Mrs. Blunt's restored good-humour.

The plan, also, to which Phœbe had alluded, seemed to promise to be one by means of which her uncle might still continue his care of her, and yet keep the peace with his wife. Mr. Blunt devoutly hoped that such might prove the case. Meantime, there was clearly nothing to be done but wait until this nursing was over, and Phœbe should be disinfected.

Except for that one visit of her uncle's, the days passed for Phœbe as though she had lived in the cottage all her life, and never was to live anywhere else again. She came and went in the low rooms, keeping them as exquisitely clean and neat as even Deborah could have wished, had she not been past wishing anything at all, or noticing the things that had formed the business and employment of her life. Cheering her grand-

father with her bright words and ways, speaking to Fib across the gate, caring for the little household generally, watering the plants at evening, and nursing the sick woman faithfully and well, Phœbe's thoughts and time and strength were fully employed. Now and then she felt as if in a dream; then again as though the past were the dream, and the present the only reality she had ever known. Calminster felt far away. In the still evenings listening to the hum of the town, looking up to the cathedral towers, she sometimes could hardly realise that life must be going on just as usual in Meadowthorn House, in Grove Street, at the Deanery, and the Grange. No one came near her. Did she expect any one? The sound of a horse's hoofs would bring her to the window with a little look of expectation in her eyes. She wondered what they had told Frank,

or whether they had told him anything at all; then scolded herself for selfishness in letting her thoughts wander from those who just now greatly needed her, and turned with sudden tenderness to the bed where Deborah lay, nearly always silent, except that she would mutter to herself, and her young nurse bending down to listen would hear the words, "Phœbe's girl," repeated over and over again.

Once she sat up and cried out something about Don. He was so masterful, she said. And something about his bringing Gideon's grey hairs with sorrow to the grave.

Then Phœbe, speaking slowly and distinctly, assured her Don was well, and good, and loved her dearly, and was at play happily amongst the flowers, and that her care for him was well repaid, for he had grown strong and rosy now, and

so brought her thoughts back to the little Don of to-day, and recalled them from the past, and Deborah lay down again.

"I'd like to see him, but it's best not," she said.

"He stands down the lane, and kisses his hand. He is good and grateful, a dear little boy," Phœbe told her.

"He's been a comfort."

The sick woman spoke with more and more difficulty now.

"And Fib—good, brave Fib! she is a comfort. You would like to see her too, only it's best not, for her own sake," suggested Phœbe.

Deborah frowned slightly.

"It come very hard. Don's girl here, with Phœbe's name, and you—I said to Gideon I'd have done lovin' by Phœbe's girl, and he knowed it."

"You *do* 'do lovin'' by me." Phœbe, kneeling by the bed, touched the hard,

rough hand lying outside upon the sheet, and stroked it gently.

"It's you as does by me lovin,'" Deborah said, with a faint smile.

Gideon would mount the creaking wooden stair and look in at the door a dozen times a day. .

"She's been a good sister to me. I doubt if she's had a happy life," he remarked to Phœbe.

"I think she's happy now."

"Don tried her,"—he never seemed to remember Don had tried him too,—"*but little* Don, he've made it up, I'm thinking."

"It almost seems as though he had been sent on purpose to comfort her at last, and take hard thoughts away from her," said Phœbe.

"My love to little Don—yes, and to Fib—I ain't noways set against Fib now—a good girl always," Deborah said, one

day, and after that spoke less than ever, but lay very quiet, and liked to hold the hand of "Phœbe's girl" in hers, and lay it to her cheek, as if to feel how soft it was, and liked to hear Phœbe read, and was "peaceful in her mind" at last, and not troubled or worried any more about anything at all.

"She be younger nor me—I never thought as she would win home first," said Gideon, gazing upon the face that used to wear so anxious a look, but was growing more and more placid every hour now.

He spoke sorrowfully, half as though he envied her that "winning home."

"*You* have something to wait for," Phœbe whispered, for the slow rare tears of age were gathering in his eyes. In her heart she feared he would be very desolate without poor Deborah, and wondered whether little Fib, or she herself,

could ever supply her place to the old man, and then remembered there was no use in wondering, or in speculating, as to what was to come next—better far to wait, and trust.





III.—THE EVE OF THE WEDDING.

IN the last days of harvest Miss Bartram's wedding took place.

The weather was warm and glowing. The Calminster people thought they seldom remembered so fine a summer following upon a wet spring—or so long a one. The warm sunny days had succeeded one another for weeks, while the busy harvest work went on, and now the gleaners had to themselves the wheat fields, stretching their bare expanse of white stubble along the hill-sides, and the hop-gardens were empty of the merry picturesque throng that had made them so animated a scene. One by one

the fires were extinguished in the oasts. Only an occasional waggon, laden with hop-bags, found its way along the road to the station, in place of the ceaseless train of waggons that had lately rolled thitherward by day and night. But the station itself was haunted still by the spirit of the hop-picking. Trucks piled high with the white sacks gleamed ghostlike beneath the moon, as they waited in sidings all night long; by the earlier parliamentary trains, bands of tatterdemalions went back to White-chapel, the station was crowded with them; and the fragrance of the hops was in the air, prevailing even over the smell of tar, and oil, and smoke, and gas, common to railway stations at all times.

Underneath the trees of the old home of the Bartrams, a few miles beyond the town, the grass was very wet at morning and evening now: the gossamer threads,

the bright clear dewdrops, lingered longer and longer in the sunshine, for the early hours of the day, and its closing ones, began to be fresh and crisp with the freshness of autumn. All Calminster was proud of The Grange; its stately trees, the long park paling, the glimpse of the house itself, were the first objects pointed out to a stranger visiting the town, and taking drive or ride beyond its limits. For the Bartrams had always been popular, none of them more so than the present baronet, who was fond of the town, never seen to separate its interests from his own, and busied himself in all the doings, great and small, from the elections to the cottage flower-show, of the Calminster folk. His figure was familiar in the High Street, or in his place in the cathedral, where he was sure to be seen, if business or pleasure had chanced to time his ride, so that he found himself

in Calminster at the hour of the evening service. The good gray head, the mild glance betokening so much friendly feeling with all the world,—it used to be said of Sir John, that he never had a quarrel in his life,—the voice, quavering and feeble now, but raised still with the old earnestness in hymn or psalm, all these were frequently to be seen and heard in Calminster cathedral. Looking at the gray head, and listening to the feeble tones, people began to say that it was a thousand pities Sir John had no son to succeed him at the Grange and in the warm love and esteem of his neighbours and dependents. Others remarked that there was no need to think of his successor yet, for Sir John Bartram was hale and hearty still. And the remark was true. However, when a man is past seventy, his successor does become a legitimate object of curiosity,

of speculation, even to those whose fate or fortunes in any way depend upon the rising sun, the beams of which must inevitably show themselves above the horizon before very long.

“My lady,” as Sir John invariably called his wife, was as popular and as much beloved in her way as he was in his, if only because every one knew what care she took of him, and how happy she made his home, for Lady Bartram had never had any strongly-marked characteristics of her own, or any very strong individuality, being on that account, in the estimation of most people, all the better pattern of what a model wife should be. The poor looked up to her. Every one in any way dependent upon the Grange, bound to it by any tie of service, knew her for a friend. She held in her hands—a little weaker now than of old—the threads of all kindly charities that have

their rise in a place and position such as hers, and flow from it naturally and beneficently—from nowhere more beneficently than from Calminster Grange, from nowhere more naturally, or with less parade and ostentation.

It was not the least either of Lady Bartram's merits that the county as well as the town appreciated her, and that she reigned with a gentle and frank, if not very regal hospitality, over all its pleasures. Her parties were the pleasantest in the neighbourhood. Every one came to her, and was glad to come, even those who now and then ventured upon a breath of criticism, because "my lady" was literally apt to receive "every one," and to be rather obtuse in her perception of who amongst her fellow-creatures was "no one." But if you did meet now and then a few "curious people" at the Grange, you were certain

to meet all the "best people" as well, so there was very little to grumble at.

On the occasion of the marriage of the only child of this gentle, well-beloved old couple, their friends and neighbours flocked about them. Of social disposition, and ready to summon others to rejoice with them, Sir John and Lady Bartram threw the hospitably-open doors of the Grange more widely open still. The preparations for the festivity were on a large scale. There was to be a concert on the evening of the wedding-day; a dance on the succeeding one; the school children were to be feasted; the tenants to be invited to a dinner; there was to be a servants' and trades-peoples' ball—what was there not to be, as the parents stood with their only child upon the threshold of her new life, hid the pain at their own hearts, and devoted themselves to the gaiety, not

wholly frivolous, or worldly, or distracting, or out of keeping with their feelings, because so much of friendly kindness, of true warm sympathy went hand in hand with it? But in the midst of all this confusion of preparation, these mixed emotions, what wonder was it that Phoebe should be forgotten, her place—so small and humble a one—be quickly filled, her absence pass unnoticed?

Lady Bartram, indeed, was sorry to lose her efficient little helper, and there was a difficulty in supplying her place at the piano. The difficulty was soon overcome. Nothing was needed but to summon one more pianist from London, and Mr. Lister could of course help them there.

Oh, yes; Mr. Lister knew a young lady well able to sustain Phoebe's part in the programme, a better performer, too, than Miss Blunt. It was arranged in a

few hours. Where is the use of wealth, or the convenience of telegraphy, if matters such as these cannot speedily be put in train?

It was odd, later, when she heard of it, how curious Phœbe was about this young lady, this friend of Frank's, this performer so much better than herself. She must know her name, her apparent age; her looks must be described to her; and hearing that the young lady boasted of a profusion of dark ringlets, Phœbe must needs glance at her own smooth fair hair, as it was reflected in the mirror, and heave a little sigh. But this was later, when the wedding, the concert, the dance, were long over, and Phœbe had left the Minster Lane, but had not returned to Meadowthorn House, or exactly to the old life at all.

It was the eve of the wedding-day. Gathered on the terrace before the

drawing-room windows, the group of friends and relations staying at the Grange formed a pretty and animated picture. Cecy and Grace Bartram were there, waiting for the canon, who would presently drive them home along the moonlit road, and through the quaint street of Calminster, to the Cathedral Close. They would not reappear until they met their cousin in the church porch, themselves radiant in bridesmaids' costume. Just now the canon seemed to have forgotten his daughters, who certainly were in no hurry to be gone. The carriage stood before the hall door on the other side of the house, the horses pawed the gravel impatiently, threw up their heads and snorted now and then, or turned mildly appealing glances on the groom, as though remonstrating against the unreasonableness of human beings, but too much accustomed

to it to be surprised; and their master, with a cigar between his lips, paced the terrace thoughtfully, now joining one or other of the groups of guests, now taking a turn or two arm-in-arm with Sir John.

There was another John present that evening,—John Bartram, the future heir, the orphan nephew of the present baronet and of the canon, neither of whom knew much of him, or had had any hand in his bringing up.

“Those houses in the Minster Lane,—those I mean that you showed me one Sunday evening some weeks ago, you might do very well with them, or rather *without* them, uncle,” this man said, as Sir John passed near him.

“Eh? what’s that? Do without them—I should be sorry to do without them.”

“And yet you know what land in Calminster is worth now for building

purposes! Well, of course you are the best judge. A free and easy old fellow, by the way, the man you spoke to that night."

"Oh, you mustn't be hard on Gideon—we do not call him free and easy; only outspoken, honest. I have a great regard for Gideon."

"A cool hand, *I* thought him;" the speaker struck a light for his cigar, and having lit it, sat down beside Lady Bartram upon a bench near the drawing-room window.

"My lady" moved a little uneasily, and just glanced towards that pink of courtesy, her husband. She was not at all fastidious; every one was free to smoke upon the terrace at that hour, but people were careful to place themselves and their cigars to windward of ladies at the Grange, and here was John Bartram sending puffs of smoke right

into my lady's face. His uncle put a hand upon his shoulder and made him move at once.

"That property in the Minster Lane is not in the entail, John," he said, drily; "I could sell it to-morrow."

The younger man did not seem to like the remark. He took no notice of it.

"I rode there one day—last week it was—and was quite charmed with the picturesque beauty of the houses, each in its own garden. One hardly expects to see so rural a place in such near neighbourhood to a town," Frank Lister said.

"Wouldn't it be just as beautiful let on building lease, and gay with ornamental villas, as let in cottages at three-and-sixpence weekly?" asked John Bartram.

"I think not," said Frank.

"Time enough to make plans for the

improvement of the property, John," said the canon in a low voice.

"Why not?" the heir answered Frank, not the canon, whose speech had called up an angry flush upon his nephew's somewhat sullen brow; "why would it not look as well?"

"Because there is something in the spirit of a thing."

"An investment is purely a business matter, and there is no better investment than building land. Some one said lately they were selling it by the square *foot* in the city now. What do you think of that?"

"I don't like to think of it at all," Lady Bartram said, with warmth; "it seems frightful to me. How can the poor live?"

Frank answered her,—

"Walking through Westminster the other day, I overheard two women talking together as I passed—respectable

wives of poor working-men. They could not get a roof to cover them, a decent dwelling for a decent family, rents were so high, they said : it was impossible to live near their work. You may well ask how the poor live, Lady Bartram."

"Model lodging-houses," growled the heir.

"On either side of me, that day in Westminster," Frank went on, "palaces were rising—for the rich. The rents in London are surprising. And those cottages of Sir John's are to be had at three-and-sixpence a week. A fair return upon the outlay, I suppose?"

"An honest four per cent,"—Sir John passed in his walk once more,—"and the place saved from those villa-building rascals John has been talking to, if I am not much mistaken. Villas, you know—gimcrack, showy affairs."

The heir shrugged his shoulders.

“Is not four per cent. a reasonable interest?” said Frank.

“Not if you can get six.”

John Bartram considered that this musician was talking of what he did not understand. He wished he would mind his own business, and, had he dared, would have requested him to do so. He looked more annoyed still when my lady pursued the subject with more than her wonted eagerness.

“I am afraid, Mr. Lister, it is not only in cities that the poor find rents too high. I know a country village—not here, not in this neighbourhood at all, but I fancy there are too many like it—where half-a-crown a week is paid for two wretched rooms, and where, for the same rent as those pleasant homes in the Minster Lane, only miserable houses of three rooms are to be had. I do not like to think of it, indeed, I do not.”

"Don't, then," said John Bartram.

"But some one must think of it, John."

"Cottage property never pays," he answered sulkily, "except of course indirectly, in the shape of cottages for your own labourers. In no other way."

"I have half a mind to work that problem." As he spoke, Frank stooped down to pick up a pebble and throw it gently a few yards off upon the terrace, and then tried to hit the same spot with another, and seemed so interested in the business that he made no immediate reply to John Bartram's exclamation,—

"*You!* are you going to become a landed proprietor?"

"I have had some money left me lately, Lady Bartram," Frank said, after a successful shot had satisfied him for the present; "an unexpected legacy."

"I am *very* glad," the old lady looked

as if she were ; Frank Lister was one of her favourites.

“ Not quite a fortune,” he said, smiling ; “ only a few hundreds, with which I feel free to speculate if I choose.”

“ Oh, don’t speculate, Mr. Lister ! Pray do not. It seems to me always to mean being ruined. I dread to hear the word.”

“ Speculate by all means, Mr. Lister,” said John Bartram ; “ it sometimes means making a fortune as well as losing one.”

“ I shall take advice ; I always do. Perhaps Sir John would tell me of a good investment.”

“ What do you mean by good ? ” asked the heir.

“ One by which—and there must be such things—I can do good to others, and yet at the same time benefit myself, so far as a safe and sure return goes. You think that Utopian ? ”

“Fudge!” John Bartram translated the classical allusion into plain English; “you can’t mix up different things in that way.”

“What things?”

“Philanthropy and business matters,” with a sneer.

“I think you are right, Mr. Lister. There *must* be a way,—I do not understand business, of course, being only a woman,—but I am sure there must be a way of investing money so as to get a fair return for ourselves, and yet supply a need, a real need for others, and that that is the right way. Those who ‘make haste to be rich’ are blind to it, I am afraid.” Lady Bartram sighed, as she concluded her little speech.

“Then the unfortunate wretches, who could afford to pay for handsome houses but not to build them themselves, are not to be accommodated, since we are all

to run up cottages and be content with four per cent.? Exquisite picture! England all over beautiful three-and-sixpenny cottages!" said her nephew.

The dear old lady's colour rose,—

"Of course rich people are to be accommodated by those who can build handsome houses. That is not what we were speaking of. I do not suppose Mr. Lister can do that. What I must say, John, is this—it would be a sin, in the present state of affairs, to pull down a cottage and build a villa in its place."

All along she had been thinking of the Minster Lane, all along feeling troubled at John Bartram's hints concerning it.

"Who's going to pull anything down, aunt?"

Lady Bartram did not answer. She got up and walked away to where Sir John was standing—alone at that

moment—on the edge of the terrace where it turned the corner of the house. The spot commanded a view of the park, looking beautiful in the moonlight, and the avenue of chestnuts leading to the lodge. Those chestnuts were very dear to Sir John. The whole place was dear to him. It was as the face of a friend, the look of that fair landscape, whether tinted in sunlight, soft masses of green fern billowy as green waves about the feet of the tall trees, the blue water of the lake, the background of low hills with chalk pits showing white here and there upon their sides; or, as now, quiet, peaceful, dim with shadow, silvery with light, beneath the moon. He felt for the whole place, for every broad acre of it, the clinging attachment that men worth anything do feel for the home of their fathers.

My lady slipped her hand within her

husband's arm. The talk, the very presence of this heir of his, had disturbed them both. They were neither of them thinking of Cecilia at that moment, though they were to lose her on the morrow, and yet they read each other's thoughts.

"He was but a little fellow," Lady Bartram said.

"A very little fellow, and never strong, you know;" Sir John softly patted the hand upon his arm.

"He might never have grown to be a man," she said.

"And it would have been harder to lose him later—later, you know, when he had grown older, and we loved him more, and the whole place would have been the worse for our loss."

The parents' thoughts were far away from the scene of their daughter's happy life,—far away, haunting the churchyard

where a grave—a very little one—held a promise, unfulfilled, that had made bright the early years after their marriage.

“It was for the best;” there was a sob in the mother’s voice.

“Ay, to be sure it was—we may be sure of that. All for the best, dear love. And see now—so old we are—we should be leaving him by now if he were here; and as it is, my lady, we are going to him soon instead. Think of that, dearest.”

Again he stroked and patted the soft old hand upon his arm, and led her back consoled and cheerful to their friends.

Meantime, watching his uncle as he stood apart, the heir had bethought himself to say to Frank,—

“Sir John ages very much.”

“Do you think so?” Frank answered cheerfully; “people see things differently. To me he seems to wear his years so well.”

"Surely he stoops more than he did in the spring."

"On the contrary, where will you see a man of his age so upright?—a younger man might envy Sir John that firm tread."

"His hair is very white: I do not find him looking well."

Frank appeared to be in a contradictory mood.

"But he *is* well," he said, "very well. I think I never remember to have seen him better. And as for his white hair—how beautiful it is! Such a serene and cheerful old age, such a beloved and honoured age, will endure long. We shall have your uncle in *Notes and Queries* yet—a specimen of a centenarian. He will live to see his hundredth birthday, I am sure of that."

"We are not a long-lived family, take us all in all," the heir said moodily.

"There is an average in those things,"

said Frank. "Sir John will run it up for you."

When his companion rose from the bench, tossed away the end of his cigar,—to Cecy's indignation he flung the fiery spark right into a bed of mignonette,—and walked away, Frank threw back his head and laughed, a long, low, merry laugh that made the girls ask him what it was he found so amusing.

He did not enlighten them, but set them both to work to pitch tiny pebbles on to the little heap where his own had fallen, and called that one lucky whose missile hit the mark at once, and pitied her whose stone fell short.

Grace asked what was the name of a melody he had played earlier in the evening—something queer, she said.

"Quaint," Cecy corrected her sister,—
—"quaint, soft, and quiet, and very pretty."

“Just so,” Frank answered, “you describe her well. Soft, and quiet always, certainly very pretty, and with something quaint about her, peculiar to herself.”

“Her?”

Grace’s pebble fell wide of the mark, as she looked up in surprise.

“Well, why not? Why not call a strain of music by a woman’s name, as one does a poem now and then?”

“But those sort of poems describe the person whose name they bear,” said Cecy, gravely.

“And my poem, my ‘song without words,’ describes—you said so yourself—some one very clearly. I composed it by moonlight. I shall call it Phœbe.”

The girls looked away and devoted all their attention to their pebbles. Presently Grace observed, “You knew Miss Blunt, our governess, long ago.”

“Long ago? Yes, tell us about long ago;” Sir John had rejoined them, and the canon too. “I don’t know much of this young man,” Sir John went on, laughing as he spoke, “quite time I knew more—only made his acquaintance within the last six years. Come now, tell us something of long ago—your education, tell us about that, for instance.”

“My musical education—I never had any other, was too idle, too devoted to my art to study anything else—was carried on at Berlin.”

“Never had any other! Now, do you know, you strike me as being quite a well-read man—well read, with a hundred and one odd bits of knowledge upon out-of-the-way subjects,” Sir John exclaimed.

“I gathered all I know—of that kind of knowledge—from Harold Blunt, in the little house at Clapham, which these

young ladies have heard his daughter speak of."

"He must have been a clever fellow," said Sir John.

"His brother, Blunt of Grove Street, is a superior man," the canon remarked.

"Superior? Ah, yes; I've a regard for Edmund Blunt myself, but I fancy, from what I have heard Mr. Lister say, that his brother,—Harold left the town so young, I can scarcely say I knew him,—I fancy *he* may have been superior altogether. I see it in his daughter too."

"See what!" asked the canon.

But Frank had understood. He answered eagerly, "That is just it, Sir John; that is just the difference. Harold Blunt was superior to worldly things,—to advantages when he had them,—to poverty, I make no doubt, when it came. I never met a more unworldly man. He

was so good a friend of mine that it struck me with all the force of some strange coincidence when I learnt that he was from Calminster, and that the neighbourhood of the next best friend I ever made in my life was his native place, and his name was familiar here."

"He was the stationer's brother, eh? And who is your 'next best friend'—my uncle?" said John Bartram.

Frank laughed; secretly he was amused at the tone in which the question had been put.

"Exactly. I owe to both of them certain very excellent things. To Sir John, a patronage that has helped me in my career, and much undeserved kindness; to my other friend, useful knowledge, picked up from his rich stores without trouble to myself, the example of a good man's life, and—many happy hours."

The last three words were spoken in so low a tone as to fall unheard by any but Phœbe's two pupils, for Cecilia came up at that moment, and the canon was taking leave of his brother at last. There were plans to make for the next day, last words to be exchanged, last directions to be given, a little confusion of leave-taking. Cecy and Grace went to equip themselves for their moonlight drive. As they passed through the hall a few minutes later the sound of the piano was heard from the now empty saloon.

“Hark!” Cecy raised her hand, “Mr. Lister is playing that thing he calls ‘Phœbe.’ I thought it was a hymn.”

The impatient horses at the door were more impatient than ever. The canon helped the girls into the carriage. In another moment the low, sweet music was drowned in the sound of wheels. The moonlight fell full upon the Grange;

it was flooded with light, steeped in it. In the Minster Lane Phœbe sat in shadow, keeping a sad watch. Her forehead burned; her hands were burning too.

"I hope I am not going to be ill," she thought.

She went out, and beyond the shadow of the house, until the world was all radiant for her too, and the light, almost as bright as day, wrapped her round as it did Frank. It was no "song without words," but a veritable evening hymn that the girl sang, hardly above her breath,—

"Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens: Lord, with me abide."

The voice was hoarse and weak, the tone full of peace and courage. Phœbe raised her hand to her throat.

"I hope I am *not* to be ill, but let 'the

darkness deepen ' as it may, it is bright there."

One look upwards, one thought that was a "voiceless prayer," and going back to the low room, she laid herself down trustingly, and fell asleep at once.





IV.—A GOOD OMEN.

“**I** WISH Phœbe was here,” said Tim, shaking his head dolefully at his own image in the mirror. There did not seem much cause for dolefulness ; the mirror reflected a pleasant face enough.

“What do *you* want with Phœbe? I’m sure I’ve missed a hundred and one things she might have done for me this morning, and ought to have done, and me with everything to see too ; but what you want with her I can’t understand.” Mrs. Blunt shook out her violet silk, and looked over her son’s shoulder to settle her bonnet in the glass.

“It won’t come!”

“What are you talking about?”

“My bow; if a bow doesn’t ‘come’ for the first time of tying, it’s all up with it; no fingers but Phœbe’s could straighten my necktie to-day,” said Tim, with mild despair in his voice.

“And *she* has chosen to prefer gardeners and pauper brats to her own respectable relations,” said Mrs. Blunt angrily, for she really did miss the willing services she had been accustomed to of late.

“Oh, come now! they are relations too; Miss Costermonger is her first cousin as much as I am.”

“I wish Phœbe was here,” a small voice swelled the chorus of complaints as Avice entered, looking not unlike the toilet-table that Tim had threatened she would resemble, for the underskirt of her frock was very pink indeed, and the muslin frills stood out stiffly.

"I don't feel neat, and the muslin scratches my neck," the child said.

"Not neat!" Mrs. Blunt looked her over in dismay.

"I feel *fine*, and stiff all over, and afraid to sit down."

"You look just as pretty as a flower."

"*That's* a 'lily of the field,' and has on its prettiness every day; 'Solomon in all his glory' wasn't half so fine. Phœbe told me about it," said Avise, looking down upon her finery with rather a perplexed expression, as though she wondered whether Solomon's state robes could have tickled his neck, and have been as stiff and starched as her own were.

She did indeed look pretty; there could be no mistake about that. Mrs. Blunt in her best array looked—very much like Mrs. Blunt; but nothing could effectually vulgarise the fragile beauty of the little

girl; and, excepting for a superabundance of starch and of broad sash ribbon, the dress she wore was after all simple enough, for Phœbe's taste had interfered in its behalf.

"I wish Phœbe was here," Avice repeated; "she'd make me neat."

"It seems to me we all wish for Phœbe," Mr. Blunt observed, as he stood in the doorway and surveyed his family. He wore his own best suit; the hat in his hand was glossy as care could make it; for he, too, intended to look in at the church where Miss Bartram was to be married. "We should all be the better for Phœbe's company to-day," he said.

"I don't know that," said his wife; "I don't know that it isn't just as well our two should cut a figure for themselves amongst the gentry." Much as she professed to admire her niece's "gentility," the speech of Mrs. Blunt

was not always so refined as might have been the case.

“ When will Phœbe be back ? ”

It was the question Avice asked every day. Her mother was tired of hearing it. For the child's own sake no one had told her how near Phœbe was. She would have fretted to see her all the more, they thought, for knowing how short a distance separated them in reality. It was better Avice should believe her cousin to be very far away. Though sufficiently well to join in the festivities to-day, every one but her mother considered there was a risk of injury to her health in allowing her to do so. Mrs. Blunt herself secretly resolved to be very careful of her after this. But how was it possible to disappoint her now,—to disappoint rather the maternal vanity, so flattered at the child being noticed and made much of at the Grange ?

When they reached the church it was crowded. For one anxious moment the stationer's wife feared her little girl must be overlooked in the throng, and felt doubtful whether the Miss Bartrams would remember their promise. Cecy and Grace were already in the porch with the other bridesmaids; the gay group seemed to fill it with the flutter of their garments, which, however, drifted apart like summer clouds to allow the party to pass into the sacred building. Little Avice exclaimed, as the sunlight streaming into the church showed the long crimson path—only a piece of drugget—up which the bride would walk, and, falling through the painted window, stained the white surplices of the choir boys with soft patches of colour. The child was hurrying on into this strange bright church where people in gala dress moved to and fro, and the files of school

girls, in gay print dresses and wearing white ribbons in their hats, were just then being marshalled to their places, their quiet, orderly movements adding to the sort of hushed stir going on in the building ; Avice was hurrying on, beaming with pleasure, and quite unconscious now of her fine frock, when her mother pulled her back.

“ Speak to the Miss Bartrams,” she said in a loud, fussy whisper.

“ What about ? I don’t want to speak to them,” the answer came, in clear childish tones.

Mrs. Blunt felt very much inclined to shake her daughter. People pressed after them ; they must go forward to make way ; there was no standing still, no possibility of lingering in the aristocratic neighbourhood of Miss Bartram’s friends. Consolation came, however, in the fact that the sound if not the sense of Avice’s

exclamation had reached Cecy's ears. She stood on tiptoe in order to see the child; nodded and smiled, and telegraphed some friendly signal which no one understood, but which restored Mrs. Blunt's equanimity.

"I had no idea there would be such a crowd," she whispered to Tim—"so many common people."

"That's the jolliest part of it; look at the old goodies from the almshouses, how they grin!"

"They and the school children have the best places," said Mrs. Blunt, discontentedly. She would have liked a seat in one of those front benches herself.

It was a fancy of the bride's that the children she had taught and loved, the old people who had seen her grow up, should be near her at this moment of her life. Of course her fancies had to be

attended to, but the arrangement did not please Mrs. Blunt.

“Where are we to sit?”

“Father has found Mr. Dawes, I see,” said Tim; “I can only make out the old birds, though; I wonder where the Jackdaw is himself. Safe to get a good place, if no one else does.”

“There’s Maria Wold in green silk. Well, I never! To have no more taste than that, and she with no complexion to speak of. No, Tim, don’t notice your father; I see him beckoning, but we *must* get an outside seat, so as to see the bridesmaids as they pass, that the Miss Bartrams may know where Avice is—why, wherever is she?”

Tim chuckled; he had seen her leave her mother’s side, but had had no mind to spoil sport.

Right up the crimson pathway that had taken her fancy so strongly, full in

the long ray of sunshine falling through tinted glass and making her path one glow of light as well as colour, little Avice, all unheeding of the many eyes upon her, walked straight on towards the altar. About the west door a confusion of people were standing, but as she came out from amongst them, and moved higher up the church, where all the seats were filled now, she was quite alone. No one knew her. They fancied she might be some little guest staying at the Grange, and accidentally separated from her friends, and come to seek them. One seat only remained vacant near the altar, the seat reserved for Lady Bartram and one or two near relations of the bride. Avice, passing this seat too, her dreamy little face raised to the east window, her feet never turning aside once, began to attract attention. Mrs. Blunt was in a perfect fever.

“Go after her, Tim. Was there ever a more provoking child!”

“Let her alone, mother; *she's* all right.”

“All right? I tell you she will offend people; she has no business there.”

“Avice offend them!” Tim smiled with an air of superior wisdom, and was as provokingly indifferent to what people might think of his sister as his sister seemed to be herself.

“It is—yes, it really is my little daughter,” Edmund Blunt remarked quietly to Mrs. Dawes, besides whom he was now seated.

“Bless her little heart! who is she?”

“She looks like some wandering spirit.”

“Cecilia's good genius, perhaps.”

“She looks—dying.” It was a mother of dead children who said that.

“I wonder who she belongs to.”

Such were some of the comments of the wedding party—the “company” Mrs.

Blunt called them—as Avice, still quite regardless of the strangers round her, stood at last by the chancel step and looked about her quietly, seating herself finally upon the seat itself, then, to the surprise of those who watched her, rising again, and kneeling down for a moment, a small hand shading the small face, seemed to repeat some little prayer, at the close of which she bowed her head, then resumed her seat upon the step once more.

There had been only one disparaging remark made upon the child, and that came from the lips of a handsome young woman, with rather prominent but very fine eyes, and with a profusion of dark ringlets.

“Look at that absurd little doll,” this lady said; “who is she?”

The gentleman addressed rose from his seat beside her.

“A little friend of mine; if you will allow me, I will go and speak to her.”

Avice looked up as this gentleman touched her on the arm.

“Mr. Lister!”

“What are you doing here, my child?”

“I have come to see Miss Bartram married. Phœbe said I mustn't forget it was a church, but say my prayer when I came in: and by-and-by we are to pray God to bless the bride. I will; shall you pray to Him too?”

“Indeed, I shall. But who brought you? Why did you come up here all by yourself?”

“Oh, mother brought me, but she said long ago I was to be up here with Phœbe; not down there with them all,” this with a little gesture towards the far-off west door.

“With Phœbe?” Frank looked round.

“She’s not here, you know, she’s nursing some one sick; so I had to come up alone to the altar,” said Avice simply, having, as usual, taken Mrs. Blunt’s words literally, and not imagining that Phœbe’s absence necessitated any change of plan.

The child was in no one’s way; Frank left her where she was, and by-and-by, when the service had begun, more than one person present glanced with interest at Avice all alone in the place she had chosen for herself, her earnest, intent look fixed always on the bride, her little figure following the movements of the others, kneeling when they knelt, standing when they stood, her lips moving as she joined with devout face in the “Our Father.” Frank Lister was very sure one little heart *did* “pray God to bless the bride.” Perhaps his own prayers were the more simple and sincere for

watching this child Phœbe had taught to pray.

The ceremony over, Cecy Bartram claimed her little charge at once ; seeing which, and dragging Tim with her, Mrs. Blunt pushed her way up the church, ostensibly to find out when and how Avice would be sent home.

“ You ought to take her home at once, indeed you ought. I do not like that bright flush on her cheek,” Mrs. Dawes said ; but Mrs. Blunt went on unheeding.

At the vestry door Cecy had Avice by the hand, and kind old Lady Bartram, who never forgot any one, was giving directions about the child. She turned to speak to Mrs. Blunt, and the sight of Tim with her seemed rather a relief to “ my lady,” who declared that the boy must accompany his sister ; they would all be glad to have him, she said.

“ He can take the little one home too,

for my nieces will stay very late themselves ; nothing could be better."

"Tim don't like swells," said Avice coolly.

Poor Mrs. Blunt was horrified ; Cecy reassured her laughingly.

"We are all used to the downright speeches of your daughter," the girl said ; "there will be plenty of people besides 'swells' at the Grange to-day," she added, turning to Tim ; "the school feast and the tenants' dinner will amuse you, I think, and cricket—of course you like cricket ? "

Tim answered, with the greatest politeness, that he would be very glad to come ; and Avice kindly encouraged him by explaining that "every one, when they were nice, was like other people, and there never was any fuss at the Grange, and that she would take care of him ;" which explanation made Cecy laugh

again, as she followed her aunt into the vestry, and left Avice in her brother's care. Mrs. Blunt went away then ; she had no excuse for lingering any longer, and was quite triumphant when she joined her husband, who was impatient to be gone, not seeing, he said, " why he need waste a whole day because Miss Bartram chose to get married."

" Both of them guests at the Grange, and without Phœbe tacked to them either," exclaimed Mrs. Blunt, gleefully.

The fête at the Grange was very much like all other fêtes of the kind—outwardly. There may have been, perhaps, more real gaiety of heart than is always the case, because there was more real friendship of feeling. Avice amused herself very well. Playing with the school children until heated and weary, Tim made her rest in a thorough draught ; wandering with her brother through the

grounds; perched upon his shoulders to listen to the speeches at the tenants' dinner, and joining heartily in the applause that followed Sir John's own speech, while she innocently called to him to notice that she was there, and was "clapping her hands hard;" and won a kind nod and smile in return, and wondered why Tim's cheeks should be so red; enjoying her own meal, which was, of course, as unwholesome and unsubstantial as might have been expected under the circumstances, seeing that Tim had only to fetch for her any one amongst the many strange dainties spread before them to which she took a fancy.

She was very good to Tim, patronised him, and showed him everything about the grounds, and made him quite at home. He was frightened, however, when she filled her lap with flowers,

and hardly knew whether to believe her when she told him she was free to do so, for the border she had rifled was one my lady always allowed her to gather from. Sir John came upon them once as they sat near the conservatory; the lap of Avice was full of flowers, which she was making into a bouquet to take home with her. Tim started to his feet when the baronet came near, but Avice went on with her occupation contentedly, only looking up to say,—

“Do tell Tim we are welcome to your flowers, Sir John. He doesn’t know; he hasn’t been here before.”

“Welcome! Of course you are. What are flowers for but to be gathered by a good child, a good child that never does mischief, eh?” the old gentleman patted her head, and nodded to Tim, and went on his way to join a group upon the terrace.

“What a splendid pair of children!” some one said; “the boy is a fine handsome fellow, but the girl is really beautiful. Who are they?”

“The children of our stationer in Calminster. The niece—his niece, I mean—is the governess of these girls,” said Lady Bartram, smiling at Grace and Cecy, “but I have designs upon her myself, now that I have lost Cecilia.”

“You mean as a companion? Oh, if you want a companion, do take Amy Sedley,” exclaimed a lady who was standing near.

“Not Mary Sedley’s daughter, surely. Is she obliged to go out?”

“Indeed, she is. Amy is a charming girl.”

My lady hesitated.

“She should be that; any child of Mary’s must be that; you really tempt me very much,” she said.

“It would be a great thing for her. Where is this other young lady?”

“Away nursing a sick friend in some infectious illness. I suppose she will be a long time away before it is safe for us to see her again,” Cecy said, in her heart not sorry there should be an impediment in the way of her governess being appropriated by Lady Bartram.

“If Mary’s daughter is really looking out for a situation,” my lady began—“yet, I assure you my Phœbe is quite as charming as your Amy can be.”

“Still, if you can’t get your Phœbe, and Amy is ready and waiting?”

“True. I ought to be glad to hear of any one so unexceptionable—a lonely old woman as I am now.”

Thus, while the feast went on, and she herself was taking part in a very different scene, Phœbe’s absence decided her fate in the matter of living at the Grange.

She was never called upon to choose ; never heard any more of it at all. That morning she had risen even earlier than usual, for she had much to do and many arrangements to make, and the burden of a sad duty fell almost entirely upon her shoulders. It had been very quiet in the Minster Lane. The stir of preparation for Miss Bartram's wedding had not penetrated so far as that, though all Calminster itself had been enlivened by it. Carriages had driven in the High Street ; the road between the town and the Grange was gay with foot-passengers in their best attire, with vehicles of all sorts. The long train of school children—three schools, the National scholars from Calminster, the village children who had been Cecilia Bartram's chief care, and the orderly line of the Union children in their quaint, stiff dresses—passed the park palings ; people who had

no business there at all, and went no further than the lodge gates, were attracted by the life and bustle of the scene, and lingered on the road—if they were strangers, to wonder what was going on; if living in the neighbourhood, to try and see what could be seen over the fence, above which flags waved, the tops of white tents were visible here and there, and glimpses of the gay company within might be caught every now and then.

A man, walking along the dusty road, and walking wearily as though he had come far that day, looked about him in surprise as he drew near the Grange, approaching it from the side furthest off from Calminster, and noticing that all the stir and busy life and motion stopped short at the lodge gates, and seemed to go no further, for the road he had already passed lay white in the sunshine, lonely and still behind him.

He had had so quiet a walk that day,—starting at dawn, watching the sun rise and the world wake as he went. The quiet seemed all over now. Passing carriages covered him with dust; he stood aside now and then that he—a wayfarer in no festal array himself—might not jostle or run against the well-dressed throng who crowded the narrow footpath. The sound of a band playing somewhere in the grounds fell upon his ear; the peal of bells ringing merrily from the village church tower told him plainly what sort of occasion this was on which all Calminster appeared to have turned out in order to rejoice with a good friend and neighbour.

The wayfarer was in no hurry to push on. He even lingered, pausing to look over the paling in one place where a gap allowed a peep to be obtained of the park beyond; pausing to listen to the band;

turning to watch, with looks of approval, some well-appointed carriage, or pair of fine showy horses ; finally sitting down by the roadside, where a milestone in the hedge marked one mile to the town still, though the town had stretched out, as it were, in an effort to lessen the distance, and the villas bordering the road on either side were clearly visible from the spot.

The bells of the village church were softened here ; the chime silver-toned in the distance. The man seated by the milestone seemed to have forgotten his curiosity or amusement, and to be thinking of other things. His gaze was fixed upon the cathedral towers.

“The old place looks like itself,” he pronounced the words aloud, “and yet it don’t. It have growed since I seen it last ;” his eyes had fallen from the cathedral to the far-off evergreen-bor-

dered road, and the corner of Meadowthorn House, the last house in Calminster showing red against the green background. "Growed and stretched out it have, and I've come back to it on a weddin' day seemingly. That's a good omen if ever there was one."

Just at that moment some new object attracted his attention, seemed to rivet it, seemed to excite and interest him very much, for he leaned forward eagerly. It was only one of the schools passing, the Calminster National School, walking in orderly ranks to join the other schools near the lodge gates. An unlikely thing to attract the attention of a tramp upon the road one would have thought, yet this man, his hand shielding his eyes, scanned every little face as the children went slowly by, and was even vexed and impatient when a carriage came momentarily between him and the

procession, so that he lost sight of one girl's face altogether.

Apparently his search, if search it had been, left him unsatisfied, for when the last little child in the infant-school—and those little ones he had scanned with a more earnest gaze, even rising and standing up to make sure that he missed no one of them—had gone on, he shook his head impatiently, and walked fast towards the town, faster than he had yet walked, as though he were all of a sudden in a hurry to be at his journey's end.

“Made sure he'd put 'em to school; made sure he'd send 'em,” he muttered as he went.

Along the villa-bordered road this man began to linger once again, turning his head from side to side in astonishment at the many new houses there. But the High Street was familiar and unchanged; the names over the shop doors the same;

the Minster Lane, when he reached it, quite unaltered.

Walking more and more slowly now, a flush upon his face, his pace unsteady, so much so that one and another who saw him shook their heads and turned up their eyes, he came at last in sight of Gideon's cottage, and could not see it for a strange mist before his eyes, and dashed his hand across them, and looked again.

“You are late, my son.”

The words of that other father that had caught his ear on the evening he had set out for Killock Haugh echoed there now.

Yes, he was late, very late—but he had come at last.

On again, with a step more faltering and uncertain, a tread more wavering than before—he who had walked so firmly and so stoutly from early dawn

till now. The two or three other cottages were passed by this time; he had wondered vaguely why the people should be standing in their gardens, talking in subdued voices, shading their eyes with their hands as they all looked, where he himself was looking—towards the low white gate, the ivy-and-rose-covered house. He was very near it now. He must stand still for a moment, to get his breath, he said, to check this quick beating of his heart.

What was that group about the gate? One or two people only, but he was vexed any people should be there at all. He would wait until they had gone away, for he must go into the old man alone. He stood aside, out of the way, out of sight almost, being hidden by the deep, leafy foliage of the hedge, and gazed at his old home.

While he looked the door opened, the

few persons near the gate—they were all in black, he noticed that now—placed themselves in order quietly, ready to meet *this*—what was it that came carried on men's shoulders down the path towards them?

“Old folk don't live far ever.”

“They fall sudden as dead leaves do.”

For some moments he saw nothing at all—heard only the echo of those words in his brain. When he could look again, the little procession had passed him where he stood half hidden—a coffin followed only by one or two—a middle-aged woman led a tiny boy by the hand, a girl brushed by him, crying as she went. It was little Fib.





V.—“ THINGS IS SO.”

QUING to his mistake with regard to the woman leading Don by the hand, and whom he took for none other than Deborah herself, the returned prodigal never doubted for an instant that it was his father's coffin that had been carried past him down the lane. Half stunned by the sudden shock of such a proof as this that he had come too late, of such a rebuke as this, so solemn, silent, and for ever unanswerable, of his tardy coming, he passed his hand across his eyes, as though he sought to rouse himself from some bad waking dream, and prepared

almost unconsciously to follow the group of mourners. But, as he left the shelter of the hedge, came out upon the road, and, feeling blind and dizzy, looked half vacantly about him, Phoebe, who was standing in the porch, recognised her "wall-flower man" at once.

With a smothered exclamation of surprise and joy, and with a hasty glance behind her to the quiet room within where Gideon sat alone, she passed swiftly down the path to the white gate, went through it, and up to the wayworn figure looking so lost and bewildered, and laid her hand upon its arm.

"You here at last, and here to-day!" she said.

He mistook the joyful agitation in her voice, and took it for regret that he had come so late.

"I'd ought to have been here before," —he spoke quite humbly, and unlike his

usual self; "was you with him?" looking at her a little curiously, with a passing wonder why she should be there at all.

"Lately I have been with him. Come."

She turned towards the house, expecting he would follow her at once; but, pointing with his hand towards the sad procession just disappearing along the lane, he shook his head.

"I be come too late for anything but that," he said, in a hoarse voice; "I be bound to foller; and may-be, if he's waited patient for so long, he'll wait in heaven still. He said so once, he did—said as I couldn't tire him out; as he'd wait here for as long as the Lord let him, and if I hadn't come, he'd wait there till I did. He's there now."

"Oh, no, no, not there! Here still, and waiting for you still," understanding the mistake then, and speaking fast and eagerly, and laying her hand

upon his arm again to try and draw him towards the gate,—“that was poor Deborah, she died three days ago. He is alone now. You have come back to him just when he needs you most.”

He looked as though he hardly dared take in the meaning of her words; as though he were dreaming yet and only half awake.

“Who were that woman, then?” he said at last. “Seein’ of her go by with Don by the hand, it came across me as he wouldn’t vex her as I vexed her. She didn’t take to me nor I to her; she’ll like me worse still now;” he was confused in his thoughts even now; spoke even now as if it were Deborah who was alive.

Phoebe, her own excitement dying away and leaving her quite calm and quiet, spoke gently to him, telling him how it really was.

“ She loved little Don, and Don loved her,” she said in conclusion, “ you were right there ; he never did vex her, and if you vexed her once, your little son made up for it, and she died having no hard thought of you at all. Your father’s rheumatism would not let him follow to her grave to-day ; in all other ways he is well, I think, a hale old man still, if not quite the man he was, or quite so fit to work.” With this she led him up the path, and into the porch, and so to the room, where, with the Bible resting on the table on which Deborah’s unused workbox stood, Gideon read the glorious words of hope and promise that would presently be spoken over Deborah’s grave. He looked up as Phœbe’s entrance darkened the doorway,—

“ I don’t take on about her winning home before me ; she were a good woman and have had a hard day’s work ; it’s

time she were resting now. If the Lord wills, I'd be pleased to wait myself till my boy comes home."

Phœbe answered softly, "He is come;" and then stood aside, and left Fib's father to go in to the old man alone.

There was silence in the cottage after that. From her place in the porch, only the sound of a heavy sob, and that was not from Gideon, reached Phœbe's ears. She began to fear lest the old man should be too greatly overcome,—half rose to go and see,—then sat down again on the low bench, for his voice was audible at last,—

" 'This my son was dead, and is alive again; and was lost and is found.' "

When he could find words at all, the first words that came to Gideon's lips were those he had dwelt on for so many long years now that none others occurred to him or could be uttered until they were spoken first. Hearing them pronounced

in the voice that, if trembling with excitement, was full of happiness and content, Phœbe knew she might safely leave those two to themselves, and wandered out before the door, that she might not so much as hear the broken utterances of their talk, or be in any way a restraint upon this meeting.

It was a great relief to her that Gideon's son had returned to share a burden that might have proved a heavy one to her alone, but that was hardly the point she dwelt on just at first. Her thoughts were all of sympathy with the old man, whose patient watch was over; with the younger man, whose feet had turned back into the right way at last. She gave thanks for them both; longed for the children to return that she might see Fib's joy, and for a time forgot herself in her deep interest in them all. But she was feeling ill, a little at a loss

as to what to do next, doubtful how long, her cares for Deborah being at an end, she ought to remain thus far apart and exiled from her old life, and was glad to take advantage of this quiet interval to turn over in her mind what it was best to do.

The grass plot in the garden was yellow and parched now, for there had been no rain for weeks; the dust lay deep in the lane, and rose in little clouds with every foot-fall that disturbed it; the hedges were garlanded with creepers bearing scarlet fruit, and the blackberries were over and gone. Though so warm in the mid-day hours, at evening the air would grow sharp. Before autumn rains set in Phœbe hoped to be at work again; her little hoard of savings had been heavily drawn upon of late. She intended, if possible, to rent the small room in Grove Street Mrs. Blunt had once

spoken of, and start quite independently upon her career. Meantime, this morning, her eyes felt heavy, her head ached, she was frightened at the pain in her throat. What if she in her turn were to fall ill, and bring the burden of expense and care upon the little household it had been her ambition to provide for and to aid? Pondering rather anxiously upon the future, Phœbe became aware of two figures approaching from the direction of the town, two quaint figures that many people were accustomed to smile at when they met them, but which she had always been glad to see, never more glad than now when she stood in need of counsel and advice.

Dressed, as usual, exactly alike, their sandalled feet stirring the white dust as they came, and raising it in clouds about their short and scanty skirts, each bordered with one narrow flounce, the Miss

Freers, nodding to her still at a distance, speaking long before they were near enough for Phœbe to hear and answer, seemed fully as much surprised as pleased when they caught sight of her,—

"So many carriages out; Calminster so gay. It is a sight to make one feel young again," were the first words distinctly audible.

"And you are come back, my dear," said Miss Joy.

"Yet not at the Grange to-day! How does that come about?" her sister asked.

"Don't touch me—don't come too near; I am still in quarantine," exclaimed Phœbe, drawing back as the old ladies advanced.

"Not with us. We are too old and tough. We see too much of sickness of all kinds, nurse too many invalids ourselves, to fear infection;" and in spite of remonstrance they insisted not only upon

shaking hands with Phœbe, but upon kissing her as well.

“You look ill,” Miss May remarked.

“Ought you to be here? The doctor tells us poor Deborah died of diphtheria. Is it safe for you to be here?” Miss Joy looked at her anxiously.

“I *feel* ill. Perhaps I am going to have diphtheria too. I have been nursing Deborah.”

The old ladies both exclaimed at once, “And your sick friend?”

“She was my friend,” said Phœbe.

“And you have been here—here all this time? Surely that was a Quixotic thing to do.” Miss Joy shook her head reprovingly.

“I don’t think it was Quixotic, Miss Joy,” said Phœbe.

“Not when Gideon had his granddaughter with him? The doctor told us she was quite a superior young woman.”

"I am glad he thought so," said Phœbe, smiling.

"He said he never had a patient better nursed. It was for that reason we did not come ourselves—we have been so busy lately, this sore throat has been very prevalent. With the granddaughter here you really should have kept away."

"But I am the granddaughter." Phœbe could not resist the fun of astonishing the two old sisters, could not resist laughing merrily as they stared first at her, then at one another, and could not resist laughing almost more than she felt seemly on that day when Miss May, anxiety depicted on her kind face, took hold of her hand, remarked upon its being so burning, and asked whether her head ached much. She evidently thought Phœbe was wandering in her mind.

"I am in my sober senses, dear Miss

May," Phœbe said then. "It is quite true what I tell you. Gideon is my mother's father. Poor aunt Deborah, whom I nursed till she died, brought my mother up. This was her old home; while he wants me, this must be my home too."

She had to give a great deal of explanation; to tell her little tale over and over again, with many tender touches as she spoke of her mother's youth, her early death, the old man's patience and forbearance all this time, the joy of himself and of poor Deborah to have "Phœbe's girl" beneath their roof at last.

"It is a history—a romance; we like to hear you tell it;" Miss Joy's eyes shone; she looked at her sister.

"It was just like Harold Blunt!" Miss May exclaimed.

They both inquired eagerly into Phœbe's plans, and heard what arrangements

were made for the return of Fib and Don when the room in which the sick woman died should have been disinfected ; heard, too, of Gideon's rheumatism disabling him from work, just at the time his son had come back to work for him.

"And you, my dear?"

The sisters exchanged glances, and in doing so made a little plan, proposed it to each other, assented to it without a word ; they always did understand each other, in fewer words than most people think necessary.

"There is a little sea-side place we know of, very quiet, not fashionable. We go there in the autumn, now and then," Miss May began.

"We used to go there in our childhood, perhaps that is why we love the spot. There are only a few houses, a little fishing village, a small church," said Miss Joy.

“ But such a fresh, strong sea breeze ; and rocks where the waves leave deep pools at low tide, and here and there a strip of yellow sand. A pleasant little place, Phœbe ; just the place to get well and strong in, and to go back to work from with new courage. We think of going there this week, Joy, do we not ? ”

“ At once : to-morrow we mean to go. It is but a short way. It would be very dull for us to go by ourselves. We are not used to travelling. Old women are timid on the railway, sometimes. Phœbe might come with us, and take care of us, if Phœbe will.”

“ But—if I am ill ? ”

Phœbe had clasped her hands together. The thought of rest and quiet after her nursing, the thought of pure sea breezes after the atmosphere of the sick-room, which seemed to cling about her still,

and taint the air all round her, was tempting to her.

"If you are ill, we will nurse you, dear. It is a fair bargain. Be useful to us, cheer us with what is so pleasant to us always, a young face near us, and if needs be we will turn sick nurses. But you are not going to be ill—not if you take this feverish attack in time. You do not deserve the little doctor's compliments not to know that for yourself. We will all start to-morrow. You shall meet us at the station. We will be there early, and take the tickets before you come." Miss May seemed in a hurry to be gone, fearing perhaps that Phœbe might refuse the friendly offer, and wishing to take silence for consent.

"The expense——" Phœbe began, but was quickly interrupted.

"If you come, it must be as our guest.

Do not be silly, child! The little purse that is to keep your grandfather in comfort, to say nothing of keeping you yourself in independence—how full is it, Phœbe? How heavy, how choked with coin?”

The good old sisters laughed at her; chid her merrily for a foolish pride, not becoming, so they declared, in Gideon's granddaughter, kissed her, and finally went away, having won her consent to their proposal, arranged a meeting for the following morning, and leaving her relieved of the fear of falling sick in Gideon's cottage, and on that very account all the less likely to fall sick at all.

She went with a bright face into the little room to tell her grandfather of her plans, and to write a note, which Fib's father volunteered to take to Grove Street, to tell them to her uncle too.

“It's about time as some one did

something for you ; you've done a deal for us," Gideon said. "I'm pleased to hear you're going visitin'. Why, you'll be back with a colour in your cheeks again—they're pale now, dear lass."

"And when I am back, we will make your father so comfortable together, you and I," Phoebe said to the 'wallflower man,' as she still felt very much inclined to call him ; "with your strong arms to work for him we shall do bravely. The garden pays the rent, and more than that in good years. We might have bees, too, under the south hedge there."

She stood with him on the step of the back door, and pointed out the capabilities of the place, with such an air of its being her business, and of this being her home, and of her being one with them all, and having no interests of her own apart from theirs, that the idea, at first so strange to him, of this young lady

being kin of his, began to be familiar, and he began to lose the sense of constraint he had felt at first; albeit, even now, while they talked together of Gideon's welfare, their mutual concern and care, Fib's father would relapse into fits of politeness and respect that made Phœbe smile.

"So it's to be growing posies, is it? Well, I've sold 'em, and if I put my mind to it, I s'pose I can come to grow 'em too," he said, and by-and-by started to do Phœbe's errand, and after that meet his children on their return from the funeral.

He was surprised at hearing that in order to do this last he must go right through Calminster to the new cemetery beyond the town.

"There weren't no seminary in my time," he said; "isn't the old church-yard good enough for us all no longer?"

"You must look to see changes after so many years, and it's a pretty place, and a quiet; the dead sleep well there,—though it ain't much matter where they be laid," said Gideon.

It was very near the cemetery that Fib's father caught sight of her and of Don at last. They were walking slowly along the high road, their hands full of flowers, and talking as usual, that is to say Fib talking, as they came. The little figures looked unfamiliar at first sight, being dressed no longer in rags but in garments that were neat and whole. And what a different Don this was to the Don his father had last seen! Such rosy cheeks, such firm straight limbs, limping so slightly now, looking so well and cared for, in his short black tunic. And Fib in her neat dress and tidy shoes! Her father fancied that but for their clinging together as of old, but for the old air of

protection that Fib wore, and for the loving face Don raised to hers, he would not have known the children, and might have passed them upon the road. He was himself again now. There had been no sense of shame in this home-coming, as in his coming to Killock Haugh. Only a kind welcome; no reproaches but those of his own conscience. He wore boots too, now, and though his dress was rough and plain, being the same he had worked in through the hop-picking, he had money in his pocket with which to fit himself out anew. He had not come empty-handed to the old man, to be a burden on him, to "eat him up," as Deborah had once said; he had come to help him when he most needed help, and felt quite proud and pleased to find how needed he was now.

Fib's recognition of him was a sight to see. How the colour flew into her face,

how she dropped all her flowers, and pushed Don forward first, and could find no other words but the one word, "Father! father!" repeated over and over again, till he laughed at her, patted her on the shoulder, told her she was a good girl, and it was him sure enough; he'd come at last.

"Of course I knowed you would come," Fib said, quieting down by degrees: "grandfather and me we knowed it. He said, too, as you'd come sudden; and so you have. Now too, when aunt's gone. She was that good to Don, you've only got to look at him to see how good she were."

Don had taken matters more quietly than Fib had done. Once lifted in his father's arms, who would not set him down, but carried him still, as he walked back towards Calminster, the little fellow had contented himself with nestling there

at his ease, and now and then stroking the rough cheek with a soft tiny hand. Hearing Fib's mention of his aunt, he gravely remarked she had gone home to heaven, and would be pleased some day to see him when his time came to go there too. A lesson Fib had been endeavouring to instil all day.

"Ay, that's it," said her father; "I come back to Calminster on a weddin' day, and says I to myself, it's a good omen, that is; and in the Minster Lane I meets a funeral. Things is so. Funerals and weddin's at the same time a jostlin' one another; a hearse and a hack cab agoin' down Cheapside together."

Fib nodded her wise little head, in full comprehension of his meaning, his simile suiting her townbred fancy and coming home to it at once.

"I must do the best I can for you and grandfather," she said, looking at him

with a most capable and housewifely air. "Aunt learnt me a lot in the way of cleaning up and that."

"Did she take to you?" her father asked.

"Not as she took to Don; it weren't likely as she would, you know. And I give her a sight of trouble. If learning good ways, which was my work, come hard to me, teaching of 'em seemed to come very hard to her. I've noticed as no one's work ain't play for it to come easy to 'em; and she sent me a lovin' message at the last, and wasn't noways set against me," said little Fib, quite grateful and content. "She were always good to Don, and there ain't no call to fret," the child went on, fretting again with the words upon her lips.

"It's the sewing as will come hard," she said, by-and-by; "aunt always sewed for Don, and he *is* such a one to

tear his clothes; most children be," speaking like a little grandmother, and not at all as though she were a child herself; "but my cousin Phœbe 'll help me some one time."

"There now!"—her father stood still in the road,—“that’s queer, ain’t it! The lady as you thought so much of to turn out to be my sister’s girl. I told you things was so.”

Fib understood what he meant by this odd saying, peculiar to himself, if other people reading it may wonder what its meaning possibly could be. *She* understood it for his way of expressing surprise and wonder at life in general; at its unexpected turns and changes; at the shifting of the slides in the magic lantern, the flitting and falling of strange shadows as life goes on, and page succeeds page, in the long story each one reads—or *writes*, is it?—for himself.

Before very long, Fib, being of a constant disposition and never forgetful of old friends, asked after Mrs. Gripps, Luke Sims, and others she had known in Nicholl's Row, and was surprised to hear her father had come last from other and later friends of hers; surprised and pleased, and hardly believing it could be true, that, having earned six pounds at the hop-picking, he possessed them still untouched. Was there no public-house near the Thorntree Farm? she wondered; or none upon the road between there and here? Or could it be really true that he was a sober man at last? She was much too wise to question him at all, much too happy to doubt him now, or trouble herself about the future. When they parted from him at the door of the neighbour with whom the children were still to pass another day or two before returning home, and watched him as he strode up

the lane towards Gideon's cottage, the face of little Fib was bright with smiles.

"It have all come true, Don," she said; "he have come back out of the far country, and grandfather, when he saw him afar off, went to meet him,—leastways his rheumatics being that bad as he can't walk, he *would* have gone,—but he fell on his neck and kissed him, and to-night they'll make merry; and we'll be happy now, for he've left off the rioty living, father have, seeing he's passed by many publics and not turned in. It's most too good to be true; and supposin' he was to go to church with us, that would be better still. We must say 'Thank God,' Don, you and I, and I won't never tell you the story of the Prodigal Son no more, because it's over and done now, and all come true."

"Where's the calf?" said Don, gravely.

Perhaps he hoped that was not "over and done" yet; perhaps he regretted, if they were feasting on it in the cottage then, that Fib and he were not with them to have their share.





VI.—FRANK MAKES DISCOVERIES.

LATE in the afternoon of Miss Bartram's wedding-day, when the shadows had grown long and the sharp freshness of an autumnal evening began to be felt, two ladies walking together up the park came suddenly upon Avice sleeping a dangerous sleep beneath the shade of a group of trees, amongst the leafy branches of which a fresh wind was at play.

"It is the little thing who wandered into church this morning by herself; she surely should not be sleeping here," said one.

"Wake her, then," the other answered

carelessly, and touching Avice not too gently, with her parasol.

The touch caused the little girl to start up hastily and with a low frightened cry. The lady who had spoken first knelt down upon the grass beside her.

“Are you alone here?” she asked.

“No, Tim is taking care of me.”

“Tell him to take you home, dear.”

“I’d like to go home;” the flush that had crimsoned her face as she slept was gone now and had left it white to the lips.

“I hope you have not far to go.”

“Only to Calminster. She is a shopkeeper’s child from the town,” the other lady answered for her, pulling her friend impatiently away; “the air gets chilly, the grass here is damp; I dare not play tricks with my voice; you know that,” she said.

This rival of Phœbe’s was to sing as

well as play that evening. When the notes of the song chosen echoed through the concert room, and some one said how pathetic the tones were, this friend of the songstress declared the word was inappropriate.

“She has no heart in her voice; it does not touch me in the least,” she said.

Tim, standing on tiptoe in the outer row of a circle of spectators looking on at a game of cricket, felt a small hand slipped into his, and turned to see his sister by his side, and hear her say,—

“I’m tired, Tim; please take me home.”

Home! The boy felt his heart sink. Could she walk two miles, tired as she was now? How ill she seemed! Glancing round, and seeing Frank Lister near, he went to him at once. Frank was shocked at the child’s looks.

“What have you been about to let

her get into a state like this? I thought Miss Cecy Bartram had promised to take care of her," he said.

"Fine care!"—Tim shrugged his shoulders,—“what can you expect from swells?”

"They're kind to me," Avice said. Her brother's arm was round her now. "You are so big and strong, dear Tim; I think you can lift me if you try."

"Am not I bigger and stronger still?" So saying, Frank took his little friend into his arms, and passing through the groups of village children still at play, avoiding the pleasure grounds, and going round to the back entrance, set her down at last in the stable yard, amongst a confusion of vehicles of all sorts, sizes, and descriptions. Taking French leave with one of these,—a low pony phaeton,—he placed Avice in it, bade Tim sit beside her, and drove the children home

himself. He did more than this; carrying her upstairs to her own room, and standing with the others round the little bed, when the worn-out child lay there at last. She had hardly spoken, except that as the head touched the cool pillow, she said, "Nice," and smiled at her mother, kneeling by her side then, and full of alarm to see her in such a state, and once she asked for Phœbe, seeming to forget she was away, and looking round for her a little anxiously.

"Where is your cousin?" Frank whispered in Tim's ear; "too far off to reach Calminster to-night?"

"No further off than the Minster Lane, with her old grandfather, Gideon Fagge," Tim answered shortly.

Even at that moment Mrs. Blunt looked up annoyed, and shook her head angrily at her son.

"It is a distress to us, of course, that

Phœbe should have such low connections," she began. But Frank cut her short,—

"If she is no further than that I will bring her here myself."

It had to be explained to him how impossible that was; how wrong and imprudent it would be to allow the cousins to meet; and as the doctor, when he came, quieted all immediate fears for Avice, Frank, who had dreaded lest Phœbe might never see again the child she loved, went away reassured.

"You never told me before where your cousin had really gone," he said to Tim, who went with him to the door.

"You never asked. It was no secret—of *hers*. She bade me tell any one who showed interest enough in her to put questions. If you think Phœbe is ashamed of her grandfather you are very far out, I can tell you. It is only

lately she knew who it was my uncle had married; as soon as she did know it, and the people in the lane were down in their luck, she was off to them like a shot. You don't know half what a jolly girl Phœbe is! I used to fancy she'd turn out a humbug; now I see she couldn't be a humbug if she tried."

"Nor could you, or I am much mistaken."

Frank shook the boy warmly by the hand. As he drove his borrowed steed rapidly back to the Grange, his mind seemed occupied with pleasant thoughts. The young lady with the ringlets found him a most agreeable companion that evening. The following day he escorted her gallantly to the station; she was greatly disappointed, however, to find that she was not to have his escort beyond that. He had a little piece of business to get through in Calminster,

he told her, and meant to travel to town himself by the last train.

"Your business is to inquire after that young lady to whom you have lost your heart, I suppose—the young lady you carried home last night," she said archly.

"I have done that already. The little girl is better. It seems to have been only utter exhaustion; she never should have been taken to the Grange at all?"

"When did you find time to call on her?"

"Before you were downstairs—quite in the early morning."

The young lady shook her ringlets.

"Very attentive, I must say. The parents must have been highly flattered."

"They love her very much, and I think they realise now that she is dying," Frank said gravely, lifting his hat as the train began to move, and standing still

upon the platform until it was out of sight.

He went back into the town then, and through the streets to the Minster Lane, where, seeing a child in the garden of the first house he passed, he stopped to ask her which was the cottage of Gideon Fagge, the gardener.

Fib, for Fib it chanced to be, pointed up the lane towards the house he asked for, and, mindful for once of her manners, dropped a curtsey as she answered.

"There is a young lady there, I think," he said.

"She have been staying there," said Fib, looking at this tall gentleman and wondering who he was; "she's gone now."

"Gone! when was that?"

"At early morning. It's visitin' she's gone, with ladies as is civil to her. There ain't no one along of grandfather now,

leastways only my father as come home yesterday. The woman here looks in to do for 'em, you know—men can't do for themselves." Fib smoothed down her print pinafore as she spoke ; she appeared to have so much condescending pity for the helplessness of men in general that Frank could not help smiling.

"Is Gideon *your* grandfather too?"

Fib nodded.

"I shall do for him myself, and for father too, by-and-by ; in a day or two now," she said ; "but cousin—the young lady I mean as you was asking after—won't let Don and me go to the house, not yet, till the doctors have *affected* it, 'cause there have been sickness there."

Frank, laughing a little to himself to think how angry Mrs. Blunt would be at the discoveries he was making, walked up the lane and stood for a moment opposite the gardener's cottage.

Both doors were open, as they almost always were. Gideon himself was sitting in the porch. In the garden at the back a man moved to and fro, and presently he also came into the porch. Frank could see then that he was quite a common man, rough in his dress, rough in his words and manners. There was more refinement about Gideon himself, the refinement a good life gives and that comes from long familiarity with the Book Gideon had studied closely always, and the close study of which is an education in itself.

Leaning over the white gate the young musician entered into conversation with the men. They did not speak of Phœbe or in any way allude to her. Frank asked questions as to the rent of the cottages in the lane, the value of the land there, and like matters. Old Gideon, taking him for some emissary of his

mortal foes, the builders of villa residences, grew distrustful of him and gave short answers. He was not much reassured when he understood that this stranger was staying at the Grange, and had come down from London to perform at the concert the previous evening. He began to fear then that he had been sent by John Bartram to "spy the land." Altogether Gideon rejoiced when he went away, which he did before long, giving such an earnest look at the cottage that had been Phœbe's home of late, that Gideon felt more than ever certain he must have designs of some sort upon the place, and was more than ever glad to see him go.

Having nothing to do till evening, Frank delighted the very heart of Mrs. Blunt by appearing for the second time that day at Meadowthorn House, and passing the hours there until the train

by which he was to return to town was due. It was true that Avice had revived wonderfully; true, too, that the eyes of her parents were fully open now. Frank found the child languidly endeavouring to fulfil the old promise made to him once, of playing her scales every day. He took her on his knee, and held the weak hands in his strong ones. Tim, who had hung about her all day long, and could not be persuaded to leave the house, watched his friend's face anxiously, as if trying to read there what he really thought.

"I haven't broken my word yet—not once; and I won't. Shall I play well when I see you again? You said I should, if I did what you told me."

"You will play very well." Frank's eyes met Tim's and answered them. Were they both thinking that, before long, the child might be joining in heavenly music with the angels?

"She was only over-tired," remarked Mrs. Blunt.

"Yes, tired all over me, and I'm not rested yet," said Avice. "Did *you* ever feel so very, very tired, Mr. Lister, that you would like to lie down in the dark, even if the sun were shining, and to hear no one speak, not even if you loved them, but be very, very quiet and still, and never move at all, for——oh, for a long, long time?"

"As long as all night?" Frank asked her, smiling; "that is what little people do, I fancy; lie still and sleep all night long."

"Oh, longer than a night; much longer than many nights," she said.

A few more notes struck feebly, and then she leaned back against him, and repeated once more that she was not rested yet, and hoped that God would send sleep to her soon.

“ ‘He giveth His beloved sleep,’ that’s in the Bible, and it’s a verse Phœbe taught me. She says, Our Father gives me my playtime and my merry days ; it is good of Him to give me sleep, too. A long, long sleep, you know, to rest me very much, and take this tiredness out of me ; that’s what I want.”

“And to wake up fresh and strong, and never to feel weary any more,” Frank answered.

He was there when Mr. Blunt came home in the afternoon, and noticed how the father’s first word and first look were for Avice ; noticed how the child clung to him and seemed glad to see him. Hearing that Phœbe was away at the sea-side, Avice said she was glad of that ; to be on the sea-shore with kind Miss May and Miss Joy was nicer far, she thought, than nursing some one sick. Till Phœbe should come home Tim must

play with her every day, and her father must stop with her too; she could spare neither of them now.

“Don’t you want me as well?” Mrs. Blunt asked.

“Oh, I’ve got you always,” the child said, carelessly; then, with a thoughtfulness rare with her hitherto, but growing less and less rare now, as though she feared to have hurt her mother’s feelings, Avice went to her and threw her arms about her neck, and said that *she* did not go to school or to the shop, but was in the house all day. The last Frank saw of the child was as she sat on her mother’s knee and kissed her hand to him, and cried to him to come back soon, for she would be rested by-and-by and able to play to him better.

It was touching after this to see, as time went on, how Tim hung about his sister more and more, and was her slave,

and could not tear himself away from her, or bear to lose sight of her at all. Touching to see how she in her turn clung to him, was happy with him always, and seemed to grow more gentle and more loving day by day. Strange to see how the one real trial in her lot quieted Mrs. Blunt, and made the daily worries with which she worried herself and all the household sink into their proper places as trifles of no consequence; how petty grievances—in the presence of this coming grief—were nothing; how the harsh, wiry tones grew soft, not only in speaking to the ailing child herself, but in addressing others also; how “appearances” began to be forgotten and thought little of, while the things so real to Avice became by slow degrees realities to her mother also.

It was nothing rare now for Tim to tell the stories his little sister loved best; he

did it every day. It was nothing rare now for Edmund Blunt to forget his business and stay at home to read to Avice, to talk to her almost as Phœbe talked, to learn of her more than she could teach, to be led by her small hand to the footstool of the Father of them both. Other things grew real to him now beside those good things that were tangible, and visible to the outward eye, and could be weighed and measured, and written down in ledgers, and cast up in account. Another account, where the balance, he began to fear, was all on the wrong side and against him very much, began to trouble him at last. What was the good now of his hard won money, of his established reputation? Avice needed what they could not give. He must search for the treasure that alone could satisfy her ; all his other treasure was of no use here.

Could anything less than this sorrow, than this blow, nearly ready to fall down, have taught them this? Could anything less have softened their hearts, drawn them so near together, made them love each other so well, be so forbearing with one another, so happy after all in one another as they all were now?

Nothing less would have done it, we may be sure of that; or the hand that chastens in love would have found some other way to chasten them. In Phœbe's little room behind the painted blind, which, when the sun was on it, threw fantastic colours on the page she turned, Mrs. Blunt, watching for Avice's awakening in the room beyond, began to seek for the verses Avice loved to hear and asked for often. This was a new task to her. She had read her Bible regularly all her life, read it "in its proper time and place," and yet felt lost now, for it was

nothing distinct and separate, as her own religion had been, from her daily life, that Avice needed now ; it was "daily bread" she asked for, innocently, at her mother's hands. When she was alone, then, and starting always at the sound of any passing step, Mrs. Blunt pored over the sacred Book that she might glean from its rich stores some word of cheer for the sick child,—that *she*, too, might be able to "talk as Phœbe talked," and "rest" Avice with the words she cared most to hear.

In the bright autumn weather the child was still able to go out now and then, though never very far. When school re-opened Tim's friends were amazed at him. It was impossible to keep him for an hour. Old games were forgotten, the Jackdaw was dismayed when even he, Tim's chief ally and chum, was disregarded now.

“If you want me you must come home with me,” the boy would say. He would not loiter in the play-ground, or go to the Oaks, or take the long walks the friends used to be so fond of taking in each other’s company; he would go nowhere but to Meadowthorn House, so the faithful Jackdaw came there too.

Both boys were Avice’s devoted squires. Jack was for ever hanging about the gate, for ever coming and going, bringing some message from his mother or some little gift. How carefully, he being a much better whip than Tim, the Jackdaw drove the rat-tailed pony along the smooth high road, only a little way at a time, and even that little way grew each time shorter than the last. How patiently he joined in childish games with the brother and sister, and never laughed at Tim, or so much as dreamed of laughing at him, but vied with his

friend in trying to win a smile from the little girl, and was quite triumphant if he won a laugh as well. He did that often. In a quiet way they were very merry all together, merrier still when Mr. Blunt was with them, as he so often was, and when he told them stories by the firelight as the days grew short. Avice would fall asleep at such times.

“Doesn’t she look jolly!” the Jackdaw would say, admiringly, as he watched the child half sunk in the cushions of the sofa; “I wish I had a little sister too.”

“Very jolly,” Tim, too, said she looked, as he noticed the clear, brilliant flush that came and went upon her cheeks, and saw how waxen fair the little face was now; and sure to get well, he thought, or why should that bright colour be there at all? or why should she be so gay, so happy always, and hardly ever cross?

and yet, with a strange contradiction, he was never more delighted than when one day she pulled the Jackdaw's hair, and slapped his hands, and bid him go away and come back no more, for he was a horrid boy and teased her dreadfully, she having lost her temper sadly, over some schoolboy joke of his that had offended her dignity very much.

"They always *are* cross when they are getting well," Tim said, with glee; "it's a good sign, a famous sign; I've heard nurses say so often."

"Is it? I wish she'd be cross with *you*, then," the Jackdaw replied, ruefully rubbing his head, and feeling a little put out himself.

They were so hopeful about her still. Why should they not hope? When is hope ever so precious as when it walks hand in hand with fear?

The child seldom asked after Phœbe

now, not even when Phœbe, though Avice did not know it, was once more in Calminster. Mrs. Blunt was glad of this silence, for she was jealous in her heart of Phœbe's influence.

"She shall not come between me and my child," she said to her husband once. "Avice does not miss her, you can see that for yourself; but if she were here again Avice would turn to her and cling to her, and I should be nothing. When the child is better—stronger altogether, when she is in fact quite well again, we will send for Phœbe back. While she is ailing,—she is that still, you know, she is not quite well yet,—I prefer waiting on her myself."

"No, she is not well yet," Mr. Blunt answered gravely.

"She does not need her cousin; she does not miss her in the least," Mrs. Blunt repeated.

“Phœbe is so fond of her,” the stationer said.

“Well, I am not saying that that is wrong, am I? I am not wishing to keep them apart for long. As soon as Avice is better—or if Avice were to ask for her now even; but she does not ask, you never hear her ask for Phœbe, do you?”

“It may be a little hard on Phœbe herself,” her husband said gently; “she loves the child, I know.”

And then Mrs. Blunt broke down, and cried bitterly.

“Hard!” she exclaimed, “hard on Phœbe! Oh, Edmund, think how hard it is on me! No one shall come between us, between the child and me—no one now.” But after a while, when she was calm again, she repeated that Avice had gained ground this last day or two, and they would only wait until she was really better before sending for Phœbe home again.



VII.—SEA-BREEZES.

“**W**HERE is the sea?” Phœbe asked.

She was leaning back languidly in the corner of a miniature omnibus that had met the train at a miniature station, and that jolted now down a green lane between fields of stubble, and by-and-by went past a cleared hop-garden, and then on down another lane that turned and twisted through a wood on either side of it, and after that passed turnip fields, where a solitary sportsman with a solitary dog had all the shooting to themselves. There was nothing to suggest the

neighbourhood of the sea at all—nothing, at least, but an indescribable, unmistakable, delicious, and refreshing smell, that by-and-by made Phœbe's nostrils quiver.

“What is it?” she asked; “what is this that smells like the essence of health and strength, and seems to make me feel strong and healthy too?” And at that moment the miniature omnibus jolted round a sharp corner, and the long low line of coast, with two martello towers, with the blue sea, with rocks and stripes of yellow sand, and with a cosy little village right before them, came in sight.

“What is it? why, the sea of course, and here we are!” exclaimed Miss May, as they stopped, not before any one of the neat lodging-houses, of which there were very few, but at the hospitable door of the largest building in the place.

Some one stood at the door to meet

them too, and seemed to have been on the look-out for them, and to be very glad to see them come. The people of the house made quite a fuss over the dear old ladies ; and Phœbe, being introduced as a friend of theirs, and being ill into the bargain, they made a fuss over her too. Tired out by the journey, short though it had been, she could do nothing but submit to all the kind care lavished upon her, and hardly spoke until she found herself established in a tiny room in the roof, and resting there on a tiny bed.

“I did not know we were to stay at a hotel,” she said then, and with a secret doubt that she was entailing more expense upon her friends than could be at all justifiable ; “they make you very welcome, by the way ; *is it an inn ?*”

“Indeed it is. You did not know we were such rich people, Phœbe, did

you, or that we meant to do things in such style?" said Miss May, pouring out a fragrant cup of tea that had been ready when they arrived, and bringing it to the bedside.

"We used to come here every autumn once; that was long ago. They know us in this house; we must have occupied every room of it in turn. When we were quite children our mother would send us here for a few days with our nurse; she did that whenever she did not know exactly what else to do with us. It was a difficult matter to arrange for so large a family, and we two being the youngest were of course sometimes left out of plans formed for the elder ones. On such occasions we used to sleep in the room below this, and go down to take our meals in the bar parlour," said Miss Joy, cutting thin bread and butter while she talked.

“What a treat we thought it!” exclaimed her sister; “it was so interesting to listen to the talk through the bar-window; the talk that went on between Mrs. Bear and gentlemen staying in the house; so exciting when she jumped up suddenly in the middle of dinner to cry, ‘Coming, sir!’ and ran out to see what was wanted. It was quite a new experience for a pair of nursery children. We felt as if we were seeing a great deal of the world and its ways, and used to plan that we would keep an inn ourselves some day or other, and have a bar-parlour of our own.”

“The gentlemen who came and went—there were not many of them, it never can have been a busy house—would sometimes ask Mrs. Bear what little girls those were she had staying with her by themselves; and then our nurse would bridle and look prim, and carry us off

upstairs. How angry she was, to be sure, when one day, Mrs. Bear being absent for a few minutes, and we left alone, a gentleman came to the bar-window and asked for a glass of ale, and May drew it herself. We were neither of us tall enough to hand it to him, and he was obliged to come in and take it from us ;” and Miss Joy laughed at the recollection of this misdemeanour of her childhood.

“The next time we saw him was at a dinner-party at home, and he recognized us at once, and made the company very merry by repeating the little story. We were quite relieved to find our parents could laugh with the rest, and did not seem shocked at such an occurrence, as nurse had been.”

“But,” resumed Miss Joy, “when we came here with our father and mother, then we were supposed not even to know

where the bar was. We inhabited the best rooms, and dined in the parlour that has glass doors opening on to the garden, where a band played now and then of an evening. But this was always a quiet place. It was for that reason our parents liked it; for that reason we liked it so much ourselves, and came here when we were left alone and could afford only one of the bedrooms at the back of the house looking upon the street, and which were cheaper, because they had no sea view, than those on this side. For that reason—because it is so quiet—we have come here now, and because Mrs. Bear is a good friend of ours, making us welcome always, and charging—dear me, you would scarcely believe what she charges us!”

Poor Phœbe’s face grew grave; Miss Joy laughed at her.

“Mrs. Bear’s scale of prices is not fair

or reasonable at all, my dear," she said, merrily. "What does it matter that this room is small? it is very neat and comfortable, and faces the sea. Yet she assures us it is hardly worth fixing a price at all, for she lets it only to the servants of smart people, and in that case it cannot be let very often, for smart people rarely come here. The little parlour, too, if it *is* behind the bar, is it to cost nothing? We ask Mrs. Bear why she should be so unreasonable and charge us differently from others, but she runs away at the first word, and has no answer."

"How should she have an answer?" said Miss May. "Is it for her to say, 'I charge thus for old friendship's sake; I charge thus that you may never be driven to go elsewhere, but that when you need change and rest you may come to me always, in this house you used to

come to when you were little children, and where your parents were kind to my parents; I charge thus because you know that from you friendly words and smiles are part payment of anything I have to give, and that money is not everything between you and me.' Mrs. Bear is a good woman, Phœbe; there is so much kindness in the world, so many warm hearts."

Phœbe, lying in the little white bed, and listening to the talk of the old sisters, thought to herself that their own warm hearts had a great deal to do with the way in which they made and kept so many true friends, but she only said,—

"*This* Mrs. Bear then is the daughter of one who was mistress here when you drew the ale."

"Yes; she never was married, but the landlady of an inn takes brevet rank, we suppose. Every one calls her by her

mother's old title now. It really seems as if the inn had not changed hands at all. It never will, we think, until it is washed away. The sea seems nearer to the garden rail each time we come. Even when we were young, in rough weather and at spring-tides, the spray would dash into the best parlour; we used to think it good fun then, but we will not wait for a spring-tide this year, Phœbe," said Miss May, both she and her sister looking quite as content as though they could afford to inhabit best parlours still, and were neither poor nor lonely, nor the last of a family that death had scattered.

Phœbe really was ill enough to be glad to rest quietly in the small room, through the open window of which the sea-breeze blew freshly, and the sound could be heard by day and night of the lapping of the tide upon the shore; ill enough to

be nursed, and waited upon by the old ladies to their hearts' content ; but never ill enough to give them the least anxiety, or to make the nursing anything but a pleasure to her and to themselves.

And, after a day or two, when the fever had left her cheek, and her hands were cool, and her pulse beat healthfully, how delightful it was to creep down to the little parlour on the ground floor, and be surprised to find what a pretty little parlour it was, although Mrs. Bear persisted in making no charge for the use of it, because, she said, if the Miss Freers had not happened to be there, it would have been empty and not let at all, so that she lost nothing by it, which queer reasoning Phœbe fancied might apply to any of the rooms at any time ! And then to go out into the garden of the quaint old inn, long and low, and covered with climbing plants, and sit listening

to the stories the sisters told, and were so fond of telling, of their youthful days, drawing the same moral from them always—that the world was full of kindness; that past happiness was a possession to be glad and to be grateful for; and that there was nothing in the sundry and manifold changes in life that need sadden hearts surely fixed where true joys are to be found! Not that Miss Joy, or Miss May either, ever drew any moral at any time in set words or with the intention of moralizing at all. But what other lessons than these, so wise and yet so simple, could Phœbe gather from the talk she loved to listen to?

She never wearied of it. It was an amusement that exactly suited her weak state just then; she would beg like a child for another story of old times, and another yet, as they sat in the little garden where there was (of course) a

flag-staff, and an iron bench, and some extraordinary rock-work haunted by three tame sea-gulls. Miss May would disappear at intervals, only to reappear with a tiny cup of strong beef-tea; or Miss Joy would steal away into the house to return with a warm shawl to wrap round Phœbe; or Mrs. Bear would cross over from the bar to say luncheon was ready, and would the Miss Freers oblige her by partaking of—something or other, which was sure to be something very nice, and which Mrs. Bear said she had inadvertently ordered, and which, there being so few guests in the house, would be spoiled for want of eating, if the Miss Freers and their friend declined to eat it?

And by-and-by, in another day or two, how pleasant it was to wander upon the beach, to watch the fishing-boats out at sea, to feel certainly a little tired, but stronger and stronger every hour, and to

be just as much petted, waited on, and nursed as ever, though getting well again so fast.

Phœbe took the whole good of such a holiday as this. To do so was all that was expected of her, and just what her friends had brought her for. It was a mere fiction that she was to be of use to them. They, too, enjoyed the holiday. It was a sight to see Miss Joy wearing a huge mushroom hat, and bent almost double as she poked over the sea-weeds and pebbles on the beach, and filled her basket with all sorts of rubbish ; or to see her, with her scanty skirts held round her carefully, and mounted upon some small rock, stand there till the water surrounded it on every side, and then jump lightly down, while Miss May remarked that Joy had been venturesome always, and always would be venturesome, she really did believe : a sight to see Miss

May, in *her* huge hat and with her shoes and stockings off, hunting amongst the rocky pools for strange marine beasts, and bringing them home with the utmost care, only to carry them back with more care still, and restore them to the sea, because she had not the heart to keep them even for a day, in the pail of fresh sea-water doing duty as an aquarium in their little parlour. That had always been her way, Miss Joy told Phœbe.

“We used to go out shrimping now and then, when all we young ones were together, and push our nets over the sands below the rocks, while the water was shallow, and quite warm to our bare feet in summer time; but May always *would* turn the net slily over to let the shrimps escape. The boys have been angry with her for it over and over again.”

“The boys!” where were they? All gone now. Phœbe knew the two old

sisters, wandering by this shore where a whole family had played together, were utterly alone; but not for that reason were dead names never mentioned between them; they never had condemned one another to silence because those they loved were laid in the silence of the grave themselves. The names of "the boys," of all their friends, were familiar sounds upon the lips of Miss May and Miss Joy still. Perhaps it was for this reason they never seemed to forget they had so many belonging to them still, never seemed to feel their loneliness very much, and wondered rather when people pitied them because of it.

As Phœbe grew quite strong again, which she was not long in doing, and the colour came back to her cheeks, and she could take long walks, run races with the waves, on pretence of playing with the children on the shore, but in reality to

please herself, and be in all respects her own old merry self, the sisters looked at her with delight.

“We came just in time : a day sooner or later would have been a day too early or too late. It is curious to think how exactly at the right moment we walked to the Minster Lane, and found her just ready to be ill,” Miss Joy said once.

“The right thing to do does always come before one at the right moment in which to do it,” said Miss May simply ; “we have found it so all our lives, Joy, and always shall find it so, we may be sure of that.”

No one came to interrupt them. Phœbe would not even break the spell of the quiet present by making plans for the days to come, or, at least, she never spoke of such plans ; and when one afternoon she recognised her uncle walking along the shore towards her, she felt rather

as though he had come to take her back to school after a day of happy play,—rather as if she regretted playtime being over.

And yet she was very glad; went eagerly to meet him, crying out before she reached him, to ask how Avice was, and whether all was well, and had he come to fetch her home?

Edmund Blunt was graver even than usual; he looked anxious and depressed. He seemed relieved at having found Phœbe by herself. Miss Joy had gone into the village to make some purchase at the shop; Miss May, far out upon the seaweed covered rocks, would, Phœbe knew, be sadly troubled in her mind to be caught without shoes or stockings. As the best thing to be done under these circumstances, the girl turned to walk beside her uncle in the direction of the far-off martello tower, and away from Miss May and her perplexities.

“You look well,” he said, as she slipped her arm into his; “the change has done you good. You must have had a hard time of it while that poor thing was ill. It seems to have done you no harm, however.”

“Oh, I am well, very well, and fit for my work now.”

She did not ask again whether he had come to take her home, and, after a moment's silence, he spoke first.

“What was the plan you told me you had formed—the plan in which I could help you?”

“To rent the room in Grove Street; I shall be nearer to my pupils so, and nearer to the Minster Lane.”

“The lane! why, he has his son with him. They told me some great hulking fellow, calling himself Gideon's son, had brought your note to me. He cannot want you now.”

“I must be there a great deal,” she said. “I am glad the son is so big and strong,” Phœbe thus translated the not-exactly-complimentary adjectives Mr. Blunt had made use of; “but he has led a wild life. It is a fancy of mine that, if I were to come and go, to train Fib in household ways, and see for myself that my grandfather is cared for as he ought to be, it might help to keep my old friend the ‘wall-flower man’ in mind of his duty, might help to keep him steady, and be some restraint upon him.”

“It might be that—of course it would be that,” her uncle answered.

“I do not want to live there now, of course. I want to be your tenant in that little room. I am sure I can afford the rent; what will it be?”

“You cannot rent it, child.”

“Why not? Is it so dear as that?”

You are a hard landlord, uncle," she tried to make him smile.

"You should come home——" he began; but Phœbe interrupted him,—

"By-and-by, perhaps; but while the idea is new to her, my aunt would so dislike my visits to my grandfather that I should feel guilty every time I went to see him. I don't like to feel guilty. Let me live with kind Mrs. Simmons, and be independent in the 'dear little room over the shop,' as Avice calls it. How is Avice?"

He said she had been far from well, but was getting better now, they hoped.

"Did she miss me much?"

Phœbe put the question in a voice that trembled rather. She had missed Avice very much herself.

"At first she did; she seems reconciled now, and so much with her mother—a

new thing, Phœbe, and a good thing, surely?"

"A very good thing," she said.

"It used not to be so always, and if it is so now——" he broke off.

"I understand," she spoke very quietly, and looking not at him, but out to sea, where one little fishing boat, the only sail in sight, was tossing on the water, which was rough that day. "I will not come between them," she said gently.

"If some things in my home are different from what they ever were before, it is your doing, dear," said the stationer, stroking the hand upon his arm; "never think that I am blind to that, even though, for the very reason of the change you have brought about, I ask you—to keep away."

He did not like to say it; his face reddened with the words; yet he did not hesitate or seem awkward, as he had been when he talked with Phœbe last.

"I know," she answered softly, "it may be best so, and it is my own plan entirely: it was the plan I formed at once."

"If your bright, winning, happy ways, and something better even than them, have taught us to make home happier than it used to be, have drawn us together more, it seems a bad return to make to ask you to keep away. If I have learnt since you came to live with us that there may be other things better worth living for than business, learnt to fancy my brother may have been something more than the mere dreamer I once took him for, it *does* seem ungrateful to ask you—though only for a time—to keep away. And yet, we must be patient with her, Phœbe."

She understood those last words, and answered *them*, knowing they were spoken of his wife, but wondered a little

what else he meant, or could be thinking of, that he should speak to her like this.

“I will not come home until my aunt bids me come herself,” she said: “I am so glad Avise is happy with her mother. You will tell me often how she goes on, and if she should ever need me——,” her words died away.

“I will be sure and tell you, sure and call you home should she get worse. But, for a little while, we will be patient; only a little while; we shall all need you by-and-by, I am sure of that.”

A little uncomfortable at his seeming to think so much of her, Phœbe, in order to turn the conversation, asked once more the rent of the room she wished for.

“You can live there if you choose, it is as good a plan as any other, but you must live there as in my home. It *was* home once, you know—your father’s and mine. When you lost him, when you

saw him fade and die, he being all you had, and the thing you loved best on earth, tell me, did your heart break, Phœbe? ”

“ No,” she said, her quiet eyes lifted to his troubled face.

“ It did not seem to you then as if you might as well lie down and die yourself, for all interest in life had passed away, and joy was dead? ”

“ No; oh, no; it did not seem like that.”

“ And yet you loved him? ”

“ Oh, yes, I loved him—I love him now; but, ‘ your joy no man taketh from you,’ ” she said, weeping.

“ That is just it. My joy could be taken from me at one stroke. Will it be so taken, do you think? How can I find the secret you have hold of, and that Harold held? There must be something in it, something real, and that outlasts

joy or sorrow ; you teach me to believe so, Phœbe."

"It is little Avice who teaches you, in loving you so much, in being good and happy even in her illness and her weakness now ; the little innocent, dear child !" Phœbe was crying almost too much to speak.

Her uncle did not try to check her tears. It was a relief, he said, to see her acknowledge openly the cause there was for sorrow ; and then he began to assure her that the child was no worse yet, that the doctors had not yet given up hope.

"There has been something wrong at home that seems to be coming right at last," he went on presently. "In old days her mother did not devote herself to Avice as much as perhaps she might have done. She does devote herself to her now ; we will have patience with her if she should devote herself too much, and

not endure to have others with the child at all."

"Indeed, we will have patience," Phœbe said.

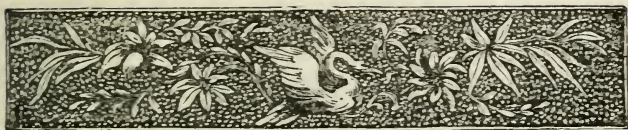
She dried her eyes by-and-by, and they began to talk cheerfully enough of other things, and he grew like himself again, and was quite good company, so the Miss Freers declared, over the meal the whole party shared together in the small parlour behind the bar. It was decided Phœbe should return to Calminster in another day or two and take up her abode in Grove Street.

The evenings began to close in early now, but after tea Phœbe insisted upon walking to the station with her uncle. It was almost dark when she reached home again. The sky was cloudy; there were no stars visible; the wind was rising, and great waves beat upon the rocks. The old ladies scolded her for

being out so late, and then, to appease them, she could not help telling them how it had been, how softened her uncle was, and how she could not but attribute this softening and the new thoughts he seemed to have to the unconscious influence of the child so dear to her; and how happy this made her, and glad that she had gone away, since her going had drawn the others more closely together.

And then, perhaps just because there never was any one so unselfish as Miss Joy, unless it was Miss May, the dear old ladies wondered that there should be no trace of self in Phœbe's thought, and admired her for it, and said privately to one another what a good girl she was.





VIII.—A LITTLE WOMAN.

WHAT an important day it was for Fib when she was allowed to go home at last, and to bring Don home with her, and to assume the reins of management in Gideon's cottage! What a thing it was to see her ways about the house, to watch her come and go, and do all poor Deborah had ever done, and do it nearly as well as Deborah; to see her take such pains to keep the small rooms clean and neat, to see how she searched the corners and routed the dust out of them, and was so careful and faithful in her work; to watch with

what delight and pride she went to market for the family, laid out her money well, and drove as good bargains as ever Deborah had driven in her time ; to see her come home afterwards to cook the dinner ; to see her take such pride and so much pleasure in “ doing ” for the helpless creatures unable to do for themselves,—the men dependent for their comfort now upon this child, so womanly and wise, so thoughtful always, and so much to *be* depended on !

Rising almost with the dawn, and going with such good will about her household tasks ; ready to help her father in the garden if he needed help ; dressing Don in the old motherly way she always had with him ; preparing breakfast for them all, starting her brother off to school after that, and busier herself than ever, what a useful little woman Fib was now !

And through it all, waiting and watching for Phoebe, just as she had been used to wait and watch for her in Nicholl's Row; wishing to please her, and to learn of her as she had done then; longing to know that she was back in Calminster again. Through it all, so gay and merry with Gideon, that she kept his home brighter than it had ever been; through it all, missing Deborah still, saying so often there was "no call to fret," and fretting always when she said it, what a loving child-like child was little Fib!

Accustomed hitherto to seeing her in rags—and quite content with rags—about the streets; to knowing, when she was at home, what a dirty, untidy, ill-conditioned home it was; accustomed to seeing her content and cheerful always, but certainly not neat, or trim, or orderly in any way, her father was quite

astonished at Fib now, and began to look upon her with respect. The first sign he gave of this was in wiping his feet before he stepped upon the boards of the little room when Fib had scrubbed them. The child being quick to notice the attention, and to thank him for it, he bethought him to fill her pails for her at the pump and carry them indoors, and try in other ways to lighten the labours which, if never beyond her strength, were up to the measure of it fully.

“It’s only the washin’ as I don’t seem to think I can manage very well, least-wise till I’m growed a bit bigger; the sheets do come heavy for to lift or to wring out same as I’ve seed aunt do ’em,” Fib said, talking across the garden hedge with the friendly neighbour who came to see how she was getting on, looking at those small arms of hers and vexed they should be so small, but

speaking with as much gravity as though she had been used to taking in heavy washing all her life, and only found it a little troublesome just now.

“She’ve the ways of a woman growed,” the neighbour would say in admiration, and would bring her friends to be astonished too. As often as not, they would find Fib not like a “woman growed” at all, but at high romps with Don before the door, while Gideon looked on laughing at their “random” play, fully as random as when Mother Gripps used not to laugh at it, but chide the children harshly. Speak to Fib of household matters, however, and she would settle down at once, pucker up her forehead into frowns, look as sedate and serious as though she bore on her small shoulders the weight of all the housekeeping cares of all the houses in the lane.

“ Seemin’ly it’s a deal to do and think of for one so young; but she doesn’t let it lie on her heart, not so as to crush her spirits,” the kind neighbour said.

“ Whatever should I do that for?” Fib asked, staring. “ We’ve got to do with our might whatsoever our hand findeth to do, but I ain’t heard as we’d got to let it lie heavy on our hearts as well.”

“ I don’t do, not as I might, me not being very old, you see,” she told her father once; “ but, by-and-by, when Cousin Phœbe’s back, she’ll learn me better, and she and me together will take such care of grandfather, as he won’t miss aunt not more than lovin’ of her goes, and lookin’ or to see her again, which we ain’t no call to fret about;” and when she said that, the family were not surprised to see the corner of the small check pinafore

raised to the child's eyes, for it was always so.

"I shall be flustered to see her about," Fib's father observed, alluding to Phœbe, for he did not seem able to take as simply as the others did the fact of the relationship between them. "I can't go for to cheek her here; I could in Nicholl's Row,"—which was true; he never had been very civil to her there. "It won't never come natural like to see her in and out, she bein' a lady, and my sister's girl in spite of it. If she learns you much more, you'll be a lady too, some one day, Fib."

Fib shook her head very decidedly.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Manners and speaking right," said Fib, "them things is that puzzlin', as I don't want to have nothin' to do with 'em. Don, he learns fine, he may be a lady—leastwise gentleman—if he will.

I won't : I'll keep house for you and for grandfather, and that won't take no manners. Lor, whatever would you do, if *I* was to be a lady ! Cousin Phœbe 'll learn me good ways, and Bible ways, and to 'do my duty in that station,' which it says so in the Catechis', and I don't want no more than that, and she don't want to give me no more, 'cause she said so once herself."

Strange to say, these assurances from Fib, that there would never be any danger of his being "flustered" by *her* presence, for she never meant to be anything but what she was, seemed to afford great gratification to her father, and in some sort to set his mind at rest. Seeing him so kind as he was now, though, as she had been fond of saying always, he never was bad to her, noticing how her grandfather rejoiced at his being there, and how he never refused

the most trifling request of the old man, who was crippled still, though never happier in his life, Fib began to hope the wish of her heart was to be realised, and that her father would take Don and herself to church with him on Sundays.

No one had thought of asking him to do this on the first Sunday he had spent in Calminster, when he had no clothes but those in which he had tramped all the way from London, but since then he had been shopping in the town, and who so proud as Fib when he asked her to go shopping with him? who so fearful that with loose change in his pocket she should never get him past that door, so like those other doors where she had been used to watch for him? who so surprised and so delighted when he did pass it and went with her straight home?

And when Sunday came, and they all went to church together, how very happy Fib was then! The day was fine and bright; though Gideon could not work, by starting early and taking plenty of time, he could manage the walk, he said. And he did manage it leaning on his son's arm, and with a look upon his face that Fib read rightly when she whispered to little Don,—

“Grandfather's thanking God, 'cause father he's come home really now, and won't go wanderin' any more; and we're all in the fold together, Don, for the Good Shepherd have fetched father back out of the wilderness.”

Whether thoughts like these of the innocent child were in father's mind as well, who can say? Kneeling once more in the church, where he and Luke Sims sat together in the gallery long ago; and kneeling too by the old man who had

waited for him all these years, and met him at last with not one word of reproach, not one question even of how these years had been spent, but with love only, and with thanks and blessings for his having come back at all, he must have had some such thoughts.

And what a walk home it was ; and how when they were nearly there Fib hurried on before the rest, being anxious about that pie, to which, to tell the truth, her thoughts had wandered often during sermon time, and which—to tell the truth again—did not look quite so good outside as it proved to be within, a peculiarity to be excused, so everybody said, considering it was the first pie Fib had ever made. How they laughed at her, and teased her, because the crust was half burnt, and how she vexed herself for a moment to have wasted flour and dripping, and then cheered up

again when Gideon declared it was the best pie he had ever eaten—inside ; and “ what was looks ? ”

Dinner finished, with what content Fib watched her father smoke his pipe out in the garden, and never dream of going away. When her dishes were all washed up, how proud she was to make Don repeat his pretty hymns, how happy to sit chatting in the sunshine on the door-step, while her grandfather rested in his arm-chair, listened to her prattle, and looked on at Don tyrannizing over his father to make him play with him !

Perhaps it was no wonder, seen from this distance, looked at from amongst the old surroundings of the old happy life he used once to lead, that the days when he drove his barrow along Nicholl's Row, the days when he was in prison, the days when, ragged, unwashed, disreputable, he hung about the doors of the

Three Crowns, should seem very far off days now to Fib's father. It surprised even himself to find how easily he fell back into older and better habits. His work, too, suited him ; had it been more regular and settled work it might have suited him less well. It was to his taste this going from garden to garden, feeling himself the servant of no one master, but free to pick and choose ; and being a clever fellow, and very strong into the bargain, he soon got enough to do, and working by the job only, and in a very independent way, had as much employment as he could undertake. At times he almost wondered whether he were really the same man as that man in London who deserted his little children, wasted his petty earnings on himself, and had no friend he really cared to speak to but Luke Sims. He thought of Luke now and then, and

wondered where he was, wondered vaguely whether it might not be as well for him, too, to leave the life in London they had led together, and be respectable again. And one day, to the great surprise of all of them, they saw Luke himself looking at them across the hedge.

The man was laughing, of course ; they hardly would have known him at first, not expecting to see him, but for that. It was Fib who, hearing the well-known chuckle, came to the little gate and asked him in. Her father was at home then, hard at work in their own garden, where the autumn digging and trenching were going on, where not a weed showed its face, where the sheltering thorn-hedge had already been closely clipped, and everything showed signs of a strong pair of arms about the place. It was the warmest hour of the afternoon ; and though the sunshine was

growing paler every day, there was still sun enough to warm old Gideon as he sat in the porch. Don was away at school, but would be coming home soon now, so soon that Fib was already on the look-out for him, which was the reason of her being so quick to notice there was some one standing at the gate. When she threw it open and begged Luke to walk in, he did not accept the invitation at once; the joke, whatever it was, seemed so good he was obliged to stand outside and laugh at it a little longer.

“Hops was it?” he said at last, and came in chuckling still.

“Hops it were,” replied Fib’s father, throwing down his spade, shaking his friend’s hand, and indicating Gideon by a jerk of one thumb in his direction, which action Luke understood to be an introduction, for he nodded and said,

“Same to you, old gentleman,” although Gideon had not spoken.

“Why, it’s Luke!” he said now, in some surprise, and with the dawn of a new anxiety in his face.

“It’s Luke, sure enough, but not the Luke as was, Master Fagge; don’t you be feared of that. Not the Luke as took Don away from here once; and if he didn’t do him no harm since, ain’t done him no good neither; not the Luke as couldn’t bear to live steady, but must needs see the world; not the Luke as while he was a seein’ of it saw it all wrong by reason of looking at it out of a public-house winder; not that Luke at all, but a different one to-day; make your mind easy as to that, old gentleman;” and after this long speech, during which he had been quite in earnest and had not laughed at all, what could Luke do but chuckle once again, and say to

Fib's father once again, "Hops was it? I told you so—you can't deny I did," and laugh more than ever?

"Happen you've come to stay and settle down yourself," said Gideon.

Luke shook his head, and grew quite grave as he replied that could not be.

"'Tain't all on us as has one waitin' in the old home still, wander as we may," he said. "My folks is gone and scattered from these parts, and, as you know all of you, they wasn't nigh relations, seeing it was an uncle as brought me up. There's less call to grieve over being left alone now, but there's less call to stay in the old place, and I ain't come to stay."

"You had an openin' for to live respectable in London," said Fib's father.

"What's come of it?" asked Gideon.

Luke, quite grave still, shook his head once more. Always his own worst

enemy, no opening had ever remained open long for him, and it turned out that this one, too, was closed. But he was very hopeful about another he had found, more hopeful than he had ever been before, he said. It was a long way off this time; he was going very far away, and had come to shake hands for the last time with his old friends, and say good-bye to them. He looked at Fib as he spoke, and seemed to have some memory connected with the word "good-bye," which was a memory connected with Fib also, for he looked at her very earnestly.

Where was he going, the child asked?

"Emigrating—way over the sea to start again in a new country," answered Luke.

"I ain't no opinion of foreign parts," said Gideon; "and I ain't no opinion of ships, and you'd have to go in one."

Luke supposed he should, seeing there was no way to get to the place by land. He explained, then, that a gentleman who had been very kind to him, and who was interested in such schemes, and going out himself, had engaged Luke to go with him, and had contrived to inspire him with a great wish to go, so that he was quite eager about it. He did *not* say that he had come to Calminster principally to see how it fared with his old mate, intending, if he had found Gideon no longer living, to persuade Fib's father to try this new life too, and bring the children with him. Of all the kind unselfish things poor Luke had done—and they were not a few—throughout his careless life, not the least unselfish or least kind was that he held his tongue to-day.

“ We take it very kind of you to come and say good-bye ; and I'm sure we wish

you well," Fib said demurely, with the odd little manner she put on now and then when it came across her that she was the woman who "did for" this small household, and that it behoved her to be civil-spoken to her father's friends.

At that Luke leaned up against the porch and laughed.

"What, not in rags," he said, looking at her from head to foot.

Fib smoothed down her print frock.

"I don't know as there is any call to laugh if a person's dress *is* neat," she said severely. Then, dropping all her dignity at once, she clapped her hands and cried out gaily, "And oh, ain't it good to think we *can* be neat week-days and all, and our Sunday clothes not in pawn neither, but upstairs in a drawer laid by and folded careful! It's such a thing to be respectable, Mr. Sims!"

"It is," said Mr. Sims, and laughed

again, and shook hands with her father, though he had done it before, and shook hands with Gideon too.

"If there was wrong done in the past, me being a year older, and he easy led, you forgive it now, old gentleman, I'm sure of that," said Luke.

"I seem to have nothing to forgive, having so much to be glad and grateful for," the old man answered, and bade Fib light the fire and set the kettle on, for they would have tea early.

To watch Fib do all this, to see her lay the table and prepare the meal, seemed to amuse Luke very much; and when Fib did not see the joke herself, and told him it "weren't manners to laugh so at a person keeping house," he was more amused than ever, and laughed louder still. Don coming home by-and-by, so neatly dressed, and with his little bag of books, and running to

his father eagerly and climbing up upon his knee, it appeared that in Luke's estimation he, too, was a joke. They were all very merry, and it was not till Luke was ready to take leave, and Fib's father lit his pipe, and offered to walk with him down the lane, that an anxious thought came to disturb any of them; but when that happened, and the two men set off together, Gideon looked a little troubled.

Fib would not let him leave his seat by the fireside, the evening was chilly now; but with a wisdom beyond her years, a wisdom born of the sad experience of her childhood, she sent Don down the path after his father, and seeing that when he took one of the big fingers in his own tiny hand he was not in any way repulsed, but allowed to toddle by his father's side along the lane, Fib, watching from the window,

turned round with a bright face to say,—

“He won’t go there with Don, grandfather ; he never did go there with Don.”

And she was right. Don, and his father too, came happily home by-and-by. As time went on, the secret fear in the hearts of the old man and of the child grew less and less, until the day came when it was forgotten altogether, and they ceased to look at one another anxiously if the strong man were later than usual in coming home at night, or if he strolled down the lane at evening, or if he said he was going out for a little while with a friend of his. *Secret* the fear had always been, for they never spoke of it to one another, and from him who caused it it was hidden carefully. Only they watched over him so tenderly, his old father and his little child, took so much pains to

keep his home happy, above all, loved him so well, prayed for him so faithfully, what wonder that the fear died away out of their lives at last ?

With this evil spirit that had troubled her early days, and thrown her upon the world, and made her wise before her time, banished and driven out ; with little Don loving her and clinging to her as much as he had ever done when they two had no one to love or cling to but each other, and growing so strong and well, and proving such a bright little scholar, that his Fib was quite surprised at him ; with the blessing of her grandfather on her young head, Fib's troubles are all over, and we will leave her here. Leave her growing up to take Deborah's place, growing up none the worse but all the better for the rough training of the first rough school she knew, the better for its sharp

experiences, so much the better for the lesson of faith and trust its trials taught her, and which she was so ready and so quick to learn. Leave her, thinking herself a little woman, and very womanly in her ways, but learning of Phœbe still, at play with Don still, in reality a child still, as when we knew her first.

It would be hard, indeed, to think of Fib in any other way, to think of her as in truth "a woman growed," as staid, and steady always, and never "random" any more at all. Therefore, though we may perhaps have just one more glimpse of her in the last pages of this history, we will be content to leave her here while she is still "little Fib."





IX.—THE “MUSIC-MAN.”

IT was on a chilly autumn evening that Phœbe came home to Grove Street. The weather had broken at last. A cold wind whistled down the narrow street, and whirled the dead leaves in the garden at the back of the shop. Some message had come for Mr. Blunt, he had not been able to wait for her arrival ; there was no one to welcome her, but Mr. Simmons, ready to carry up her box, and his wife, who was sadly afraid Phœbe would feel lost and lonely at living by herself.

“I lit a small fire, miss, and tea is just ready, and a baby keeps a place

cheerful, I think, so I've kept him up to see you," she said, timidly, meeting Phœbe at the head of the stairs, and holding out a little white bundle towards her, as if "baby" were a welcome in itself.

Little Mrs. Simmons, a shy, pale, silent woman, was quite surprised, she told her husband afterwards, that Phœbe should run gaily up the stairs, seem so delighted with the room, so pleased to be independent, and to live alone.

"Think how many do it," Phœbe cried; "I shall feel really at work at last, and not playing at it only. There is just one drawback, uncle will not let me pay rent, you know."

"I should think not, miss," said Mrs. Simmons, watching Phœbe a little anxiously, for she had that precious infant in her arms by this time.

"And as for this room," the girl went

on, "this dear little room, it was my father's once. He must have come back to it at night, after he had been walking with my mother in the Minster Lane; from this window he must have seen my grandfather at work down in the garden, just as I hope to do, when he gets better and about again."

"Seen your grandfather, Miss Phœbe!" the cheeks of Mrs. Simmons were quite pink, her small dull eyes wide open with astonishment.

"Oh, didn't you know? has no one told you yet?" Phœbe was glad to tell the tale herself, and could not help being amused to see how much more at ease with her Mrs. Simmons became after having heard it. That Phœbe's mother had been neither more nor less than the daughter of old Fagge, the gardener seemed to bring Phœbe comfortably near to the shopman's wife. Though

Phœbe herself had not altered at all, and was never likely to alter very much whatever change befel her, Mrs. Simmons was no longer quite the same; she grew more at home, and lost that sense of its being odd and unsuitable for her employer's niece to live alone over the shop.

Phœbe had to repeat her story often in the week that followed. It was a nine days' wonder to her pupils in the Close.

"Was that it? Was that who Harold Blunt married?" Mr. Bartram exclaimed when Cecy told him. Well, I must say I am glad it was to people having a claim upon her Miss Phœbe went in sickness; for, to tell the truth, I thought it a Quixotic thing to do, you know—to throw you and Grace over for a sick friend." And then he thought no more about it, but Cecy and Grace chattered

over it just as much as Phœbe would allow.

They wrote the wonderful news to "my lady," for the Grange was shut up, and Sir John and Lady Bartram had gone abroad to join the young people. The whole party were to pass Christmas on the continent; the Grange would remain deserted until spring.

"Oh, Miss Blunt, how good of you it was to go away just then! for Amy Sedley is with 'my lady' now, and if you had been at hand I know my aunt would have got her own way and robbed us of you," Cecy said, looking at the affair, as was but natural, from her own point of view.

When my lady got Cecy Bartram's letter, she wrote in reply that she was very glad to hear her young friend had behaved so well. It was rare to find any one doing so exactly and simply

what they ought. The girls might with advantage learn other things than music and grammar from Phœbe Blunt, she wrote; and declared she was thankful, and so was Sir John also, that good old Gideon had some one to look after him in his old age, and take the kind, loving care of him they were sure his grand-daughter would take. They both sent their love to Phœbe, and as Cecy showed her the letter, she had all the pleasure of seeing the warm approval of her conduct by people whose opinion she valued.

The nine days' wonder died away by degrees. In the wild, wet autumn weather, Phœbe, trudging to and fro to give her lessons, was obliged to invest in a waterproof cloak, and worked bravely on, undertaking a little more than she had done hitherto, but keeping one afternoon free for Fib just as religiously

as she had once done for Avice. That sewing which the child had feared would "come so hard" Phœbe undertook almost entirely; every day of her life she paid a short visit to her grandfather, watchful over his comfort, watchful over the whole little household, but, as Gideon had said would be the case, going her own way still, and not finding any difference except in their knowing each other at last, and loving each other truly. Mrs. Blunt need not have been afraid. It would not have hurt her dignity very much had these visits to the Minster Lane been paid from Meadowthorn House. Phœbe had been right herself; the knowledge of the humble relations belonging to her did not affect her prospects in the very least.

True, she had not been able to resist a malicious feeling of amusement when Maria Wold had abruptly discontinued

her lessons; and, later on, finding that Phoebe still retained her post at the Deanery, wishing to renew them, could no longer have the day or hour that suited her, both having been eagerly appropriated by other pupils. But Maria Wold was the one exception to the universal rule.

The days passed quietly. Mr. Blunt brought word every morning how Avice was; or, if he did not come to Grove Street at all, Phoebe started with a heavy heart for her day's work, her feet like lead, her spirits sunk to their lowest ebb. And the very next day, perhaps, her uncle would come in cheerfully, declaring the child was better, much; there was hardly cause for anxiety at all, and Phoebe must come home very soon now. She grew used to hearing him say that, used to the knowledge that she must not take him at his word, but

look upon Grove Street,—her small room there, the quiet garden where only a few chrysanthemums bloomed now, and where the dead leaves lay rotting on the moist black earth,—as the only “home” she had. Seeing her cheerful and busy, at work always, and looking like herself, with always a bright smile or merry word as she passed through the shop, he grew used to it also, and the sense that she was in any way turned out or banished from Meadowthorn House grew less and less.

Tim came now and then, not very often, for she was out nearly all day long, out always just at the time when he passed by to or from school: affectionate always when he did come, and merry too, with a manner frank and open as ever; but more considerate and gentle now, which it touched Phœbe to see. He gave his father no trouble at this

time, she heard, and was so pleased to hear. It would be too much to expect of Tim that he should bring home prizes, be a shining light to his class, or in any way an example to the school, but he was very steady and learnt fairly, and got into no scrapes. But even Tim was growing more and more used to her absence, growing to take it quite as a matter of course that the little governess should work on by herself, and live alone.

The weather grew colder; the first snow fell early that year. As the Christmas holidays approached, Phœbe might have felt a little dull, if Mrs. Simmons' baby had not been ailing at that time,—a very convenient time for baby to have chosen, Phœbe said, since she had leisure to help to nurse it, and to cheer the weak-spirited little mother, who began to fret at once; if there had not been

winter clothes to make for Fib and Don ; if old Gideon had not needed her oftener in the snowy weather when he could not stir from his fireside ; if, above all, she had not been too glad of long hours at her disposal in which to practise her music, for teaching left her far too little time for that. Her uncle had taken care that she should have a piano in the parlour over the shop, and she made the most of it these holidays. Perhaps, she told herself, after the family at the Grange were back again, " my lady " might need her for her musical parties, though, to be sure, this Miss Sedley must be a good musician herself ; or they might engage that friend of Mr. Lister's who had taken Phœbe's place at the last concert. Phœbe had asked many questions about this lady ; Cecy and Grace had been obliged to describe her fully. It was good practice, Phœbe told her pupils,

to describe different styles of playing, and would make them attentive to music, and quick to notice peculiarities or beauties in it. Cecy did not quite see what the colour of a lady's hair had to do with her style of playing, but, of course, was too sensible to make that remark to her governess, and answered gravely and sedately to every question put to her.

During the holidays Phoebe was at liberty to go every day to the cathedral services; she had learnt to love them dearly. If she did ever feel dull or sad, anxious about Avice, or lonely in the least, there she never failed to recover the quiet serenity of her spirits.

"The scene changes, but realities are the same always," she said to herself one day, as she walked rapidly up and down the sheltered side of the Close, to warm her feet before entering the

cathedral ; “just now it seems to be the time for me to learn to live alone. Not a hard lesson, for how little alone I really am after all ! ”

“What are you thinking of ? ” a voice said in her ear, and she turned to see the two Miss Freers standing by her side ; “pleasant thoughts always, Phœbe ; you were smiling to yourself. What was it ?

“I believe I was glad not to be alone in the world,” said Phœbe.

The two sisters looked at one another.

“Come to us on Christmas Day,” Miss Joy said then.

“Oh, no ! Think how disappointed little Fib would be ! Think what an important thing her Christmas dinner is to her. I do believe she cooks it in her dreams at night already. I have promised to keep Christmas with my grandfather, Miss Joy.”

"Not at Meadowthorn House?" Miss May asked, sharply.

"Not there yet, dear Miss May: perhaps never there again. I seem settling down so steadily in Grove Street now."

The old ladies shook their heads. They had their own thoughts on this matter; but Phœbe would not listen to a word of them.

"Don't say it, Miss Joy; please don't," she cried merrily.

"Don't say what?"

"Whatever it is you were going to say just now—say anything but that. Say what a fine day it is; how clear and bright the air; what a seasonable Christmas we shall have—anything of that sort that you like, but nothing of what you and Miss May were thinking then. Hark! there is the last bell."

They all went into the cathedral together, and on leaving it Phœbe betook

herself through the snowy streets to the Minster Lane.

On this particular afternoon she was greeted with a remark from her grandfather that surprised her very much. He looked worried about something, Phœbe thought, and the moment she came in, said eagerly,—

“*You* might know, to be sure, Phœbe, what sort that music-man was as stayed up at Sir John’s.”

“Music-man?” she repeated, a little puzzled.

“Ay; something of that kind. He as come down from London to play tunes at the wedding.”

“Mr. Lister?”

“That was the name. Is he a respectable man?”

“Oh, yes; he is respectable,” she said, laughing.

“I’ve looked, you know as I have,

to turning out if Sir John died, Phœbe ; but I can't say I ever looked to leavin' the old place and Sir John living still."

"Are you going to leave it?" Phœbe asked in some dismay.

"Freeman called round yesterday about the rent," said Gideon.

"Is there any difficulty? Are we behindhand with the rent?"

"'Tain't nothing of that sort; you ain't no call to be bringing out that little purse of yours, dear lass, as you're so ready with at all times," the old man answered, smiling at her eagerness; "it ain't the rent as is the trouble."

"What is the trouble then?"

"Jest this. Sir John have sold the place, and sold it to the music-man. He come spying round here one time when you was away; I didn't think no good of him then. He come talking

pretty civil, to be sure, but spying all round. I made sure he'd villas in his mind, or something worse, if worse there could be."

"Has Mr. Lister bought the cottage, then!"

"That's just what I'm tellin' you," Gideon replied, a little testily, for he found Phœbe rather dull of comprehension that afternoon. "But there," he went on, recovering himself almost immediately, "it ain't a thing to worry over. I did fancy, at one time, that my boy once home again I shouldn't care where 'twas we lived together. I'd a mind to bide here, you know I had, till he did come; after that I fancied 'twould be all the same to me where I was—but roots strike deeper than we think for."

"And you are so rooted here, you love the little place so well, it would

go very hard with you to have to leave it," Phœbe said.

"It would that. A deal have come and gone, you see, in all these years. Your mother first: 'twas down the walk you come one day yourself, and looked so like her as give me a turn, and most made it seem as though old days were come again, and the dead was back in life; 'twas over at the gate there as Fib and Don came begging and praying to be let in, and me so glad to see 'em, and so sure in my heart as he would come after 'em himself. 'Twas in at the gate there as he did come; and through it as poor Deborah was carried out. 'Twill come very hard on me to leave the place."

"Must you leave it? Are you sure of that? Who is it told you so, since I was here yesterday?"

"What should the music-man have

bought it for, but to turn me out? Did you know him, Phœbe?"

"Yes; I know him."

"To speak to?"

"Oh, yes; I have spoken to him often. I knew him before I met him here; he is an old friend of my father's."

"That's the best thing I've heard about him yet. Freeman, he says to me, it ain't to Sir John as you pays rent after this: Mr. Lister, he's your landlord now. Sir John's sold all the land this side the lane, and them two houses opposite is to go next, and to the same man, so he'll have it all in time."

"What can he want with it?" Phœbe spoke more to herself than to the old man. She felt puzzled, pleased, a little bewildered altogether. Gideon answered quickly,—

"That's what I say! Is it *villas* he's after?" with the old contempt in his tone as he pronounced the obnoxious word; "is he a friend of Mr. John Bartram's, by the way?"

"John Bartram's! Oh, I see now! How stupid of me, to be sure; I see plainly now, of course."

"Young eyes is sharp; tell us what it is you see," said Gideon; "if so be the music-man is a friend of Sir John's nephew, he'll be no friend of Sir John's tenants. My mind misgive me as he was after no good, when I see him come spying round that day."

"He was after no harm," said Phœbe, "we may be sure of that. Don't you understand, grandfather, Sir John has sold this land now, just as I heard him say he bought it long ago, to save it from villa-building men,—not to have villas built on it?"

“How do you make that out?” The old man began to look more hopeful.

“We all know that if it went with the other property it would be let on building lease,” said Phœbe, trying to remember conversations she had heard at the Grange and in the Close, and understanding them the better for this new light thrown on them; “but Mr. Lister will never do that. Sir John is an old man now; in selling these cottages to a good man, who will be content to lease them as they are, there is at least one more life between them and the villas you dislike so much. I am sure, grandfather, that is the reason Sir John has sold them at all—just that you never may be turned out, but live here always.”

“Happen that is so.”

Very much relieved in his mind, the old cheerful look returned to the shrewd face; yet the last words he said to

Phœbe when he took leave of her that day were,—

“It do come queer to pay rent to a music-man, and not to Sir John. I don’t half like it. What’s a music-man!”

Phœbe went away laughing to herself. What was a music-man, indeed? Her grandfather seemed to think very poorly of such a person. As for Phœbe herself, she felt much as though some one had given her an unexpected Christmas-box; very much more in the mood to spend a merry Christmas than she had yet been. That Frank was her grandfather’s landlord seemed to relieve her mind of all anxiety on his account. She felt quite easy about him now, and told herself that was the reason for her renewed spirits, that and nothing else—not at all the thought that a person possessed of property in Calminster

might reasonably be expected to come and look after it now and then.

Mrs. Simmons was more surprised at her than ever. She sang so merrily to baby, making him laugh and crow; sang while she put the finishing touches to the Christmas gifts she was working at so busily; insisted upon sticking up bits of holly in her lonely room; seemed so in tune with all happy Christmas thoughts; and though her eyes filled as she spoke of Avice—which, of course, they did very often—appeared so able to trust the child she loved to Him who was born a Child Himself on Christmas Day, that even tears for Avice only softened, and could not quench the happiness that was hers at heart.

Little Mrs. Simmons, who, by way of showing sympathy with Phœbe's solitary condition, thought it necessary to meet her mournfully, to sigh as she set the

table, to speak in a suppressed voice, and move softly as though there were sickness in the room, was laughed out of all her lugubrious ways, and found herself quite merry upon Christmas morning.

"A sad world? of course it is that at times; but what a happy world as well! How should it be otherwise to us who remember it is the same world that Jesus came to live in? And if we ever do forget that, it cannot be forgotten, surely, to-day of all the days of the year," said Phoebe, as she took leave of the little woman, and set out to play her part in that most wonderful event, Fib's Christmas dinner.





X.—SORROW'S TEACHING.

THE new year was more than a month old when little Avice fell at last into that “long, long sleep,” that was to “take the tiredness out of her,” and rest her very much, so much that she would wake up refreshed and strong, and never be weary any more.

When they came to fetch Phœbe one cold February morning, she was standing at her window watching a few snowflakes that were falling softly. It was a grey, dull day ; hushed and quiet. The child had asked for her, they said. The evening before she had whispered to her

mother "that Phœbe had been a long time away; and she would like to see her. Would they please send for her to-morrow?"

She knew her when she came, and smiled, and seemed glad to see her, but in a very few hours after that, all was over. The condition Mrs. Blunt had once imposed upon her niece's return was fulfilled. They had not sent for Phœbe back until the time had come for Avice to be no longer ailing, but for all to be well with her.

Phœbe's heart was wrung with their grief; sore too from this long parting from the child, a parting she had felt more than any one about her had quite understood. Longing to be of some use and comfort now, she did the very best thing possible, in doing what was most unusual with her, and what she blamed herself for doing; for she broke down

quite. Instead of being able to give consolation, she needed it; she lay sobbing uncontrollably in the little room she had always slept in; scolding herself; struggling in vain to recover self-control; begging them to forgive her, to go away and leave her, not to trouble themselves about her at all. Instead of which, touched by this sympathy in her bereavement, touched that her own grief should be so truly Phœbe's grief as well, touched by the helplessness of her sorrow now, Mrs. Blunt hung over her, and seemed to find comfort herself in soothing Phœbe.

Phœbe used to say later that but for the way in which she behaved then, and of which she was so much ashamed, she never would have known how tender and how kind her aunt could be.

There was never any talk of her going back to Grove Street after that. For the first few quiet days that followed

the child's death she did not think of it herself, and later, when she was setting out to give her lessons, which had ceased only for a week, and Mrs. Blunt, looking at her anxiously, said, "You will be wanting to go to the Minster Lane too, Phœbe, your grandfather will be wondering why he does not see you," the girl understood that the old prejudice was laid aside, and "appearances" not what they once had been in the eyes of the mistress of Meadowthorn House. She went up to her aunt and kissed her softly. And then Mrs. Blunt began to cry.

"You were so good to her from the very first; you taught her all that was right, and taught me to teach her too, though for that matter it was I who learned of her. You won't leave us, will you? Think how dull the house will

be for Tim and for your uncle—how dull and how sad, Phœbe.”

“Dull for a little while because we miss her so, the dear, dear child; but not sad for long, aunt; why should it be sad because we may number one of God’s angels amongst the household now?”

“But you won’t leave me?” Mrs. Blunt repeated.

“Of course I will not leave you,” she said, trying to smile through the tears that kept those of her aunt company.

Phœbe had once declared she would not return to them until Mrs. Blunt herself begged her to do so. That time had come now, and Phœbe stayed.

A week after that she was going to see Gideon one day, in a perfect down-pour of rain, and too much occupied with her struggles to hold up the um-

brella—which, at every street corner, the wind threatened to turn inside out—to be very certain where she went, when she became aware that some one was walking by her side. It was Frank Lister.

“What weather to be out in!” he said, coolly taking possession of the umbrella and holding it over her.

“I am out in all weathers,” Phœbe answered, quite commendably cool herself. “Have you been to Meadowthorn House?”

He bowed his head.

“I never expected to see that dear little girl again, or that she would even have lived so long,” he said. “I am glad you are there now, for they must need you sorely.”

“I shall stay with them,” said Phœbe.

“Yes; your grandfather can scarcely need you so much as they will—for the

present. Do you know, I was rather taken by surprise when Mrs. Blunt sent me after you, saying I should find you in the Minster Lane. It was at the bedside of little Avice I first heard you were there at all—your aunt did not speak of it in quite the same tone then?”

“They are so different now,” Phœbe exclaimed, warmly.

“Sorrow teaches lessons that nothing else will teach,” Frank answered, as they walked on side by side through the muddy lane.

“You have come to see your property, I suppose,” Phœbe said at last; “not a cheerful day to see it on. Even the Minster Lane cannot look pretty in such weather as this.”

“Are you cold? are you wet? are you tired?” Frank asked, standing still, while the rain-drops pattered upon the umbrella, and the wind shook it angrily.

“None of the three—why do you want to know?”

“Because I’ve a story to tell you.”

“Out here, in the rain?”

“Yes, out here. It is only a short story—an old story, Phœbe.”

Phœbe’s heart stood still for an instant, and then began to beat very fast; but as she herself stood still likewise, in spite of mud, and wet, and wind, Frank proceeded to tell his short story there and then.

What it was may safely be left to the reader’s imagination. At the end of it Phœbe and the “music-man” appeared before Gideon together. What they said to him reconciled the old man completely to his change of landlord; indeed, ever after that he persisted in calling himself Phœbe’s tenant, which was all wrong, though Gideon demanded to be told the meaning of the marriage service if his

grand-daughter was not, amongst Frank Lister's other "worldly goods," to be endowed with the cottages in the Minster Lane.

"Don't it come sudden?" he asked a little anxiously, after they had been talking together for some time,—“don't it come *too* sudden to be wise?”

"It does not come suddenly to me," Frank said; "I have known her a long time now, and, from the time I knew her first, have never thought of any ending but this ending: never had any other hope than the hope she has fulfilled to day."

Hearing which Phœbe's cheeks took so bright a tinge that her grandfather remarked, weather seemed to be of no more account to her than it used to be to himself, for the rain had done her no harm, and she looked like a rose.

This new change in Phœbe's fortunes did not take place till some months later. She could not bear to leave her uncle and her aunt, or poor Tim either, while their sorrow was so new, their loss so recent. But the day came at last when she and Frank went away together ; and when the day came, Phœbe did not even know where she was going. All she knew was that Frank had been preparing a little home near London, and that he wished to surprise her with it when his preparations were complete.

As they left the station, however, and drove through streets familiar to Phœbe, and as he noticed how her colour came and went, and what questioning looks she turned on him from time to time, Frank judged it better to break the matter to her by degrees.

“ When I came back last from Leipsic, having been, as you know, dear, two

years away, and found a certain little house standing empty, and you gone I knew not where, I said to myself, 'I will take that house, and I will live in it with Phœbe.' I have done as I said," he whispered, with his arm thrown round his wife.

For it was to none other than the small house near Clapham Common that he brought his bride; the house where he had first learnt to know and love her; the house so sacred to Phœbe from the memory of her father, that the surprise was not at first all joyful, but full of a very tender sorrow too.

The first spring after her marriage Mrs. Frank Lister, fully determined that the three homes of which she was the centre, being so dearly loved and valued in them all, should be one home in heart, and never separated by anything but distance, sent for Fib to pay her a

little visit, in the course of which the two went together to Nicholl's Row.

The squalid children were at play there as of old ; the dirt was there ; the untidy women, the hopeless-looking men were there. Whatever else had changed for the better, there was no change in Nicholl's Row ; everything was sadly the same as when Fib had been there last.

" I'm that sorry for 'em I could cry," the child said, earnestly ; " I didn't think of it before ; it never seemed so bad when I lived here myself, But I'm that sorry for 'em now ! Can nothing be done for 'em, Cousin Phœbe ? "

" A great deal can be done for them," said Phœbe, hopefully ; " what else is there for us to do but to take care of such places as this, and try to make them better if we can ? "

The words contained a prophecy ful-

filled in days that followed, for Phœbe took for her life's work, henceforth, the doing what she could in places such as this, and Frank helped her. These two worked hand-in-hand all their days, true husband and true wife.

“There's the Three Crowns!” Fib cried, quite excited at this visit to her old neighbourhood, glad and sorry both at once, half smiling, half weeping to find herself there again. “Only to think father won't never go in and out no more; and, oh! the times and times we have stood watching for him, Don and me! But I'm that sorry for the others as do go there still, and the little children as waits for 'em still about the doors.”

They passed on to the house of Mrs. Gripps; Fib led the way. “I ought to know it,” she said; “why, the steps ain't mended, I declare; nor it ain't been whitewashed neither,” the child

whispered, peering into the front kitchen ;
“ I never seemed to think it was as dirty
as all this ; it strikes one now.”

In the kitchen the whir of the rusty sewing-machine stopped suddenly as they entered. All was so exactly the same as ever. The slatternly room, the unmade bed, the remnants of the last unwholesome meal upon the table still, and Mrs. Gripps herself busy with the old greasy work ; all was unaltered quite. Fib might have left the place only yesterday for any difference in it that her eyes could see. Mrs. Gripps glanced up at them in surprise. She had been too familiar with Fib's features not to recognise the child at once in spite of her improved dress and looks. The recognition did not seem to give her pleasure ; anything but that. The scowl upon her face would have told plainly enough to any one having the pleasure

of Mrs. Grippe's intimate acquaintance what thoughts rose in her mind at the sight of little Fib.

“ Fell on her feet, have she ! and wears good clothes, and is come back to cheek me now ; and brought a lady to lecture and to preach at one as ladies do ; but I'll not *be* cheeked nor lectured neither,” thought Mrs. Grippe. Whatever her own conscience might have whispered from time to time regarding her treatment of two helpless children, the woman had no mind to hear reproaches from Fib or from Fib's friend.

But what was this the child was saying—this about thanks for having “ done for her and Don in the old days ? ”

“ We must have made a deal of work ; I know that now, seein' I've growed bigger and have a house to mind myself. I know what children is, and I hope you don't bear us no ill-will for all the

trouble we give you then. I'm as sorry for it as can be," said Fib.

"Why, you've growed quite respectable!" exclaimed the woman, glad to have the remark to make to hide her own confusion at this very unexpected address.

"And so have Don! You'd not know Don, he's that respectable; strong and hearty, too. I looked in to-day for to tell you not to trouble about his lameness no more" (much Mrs. Gripps had troubled herself!), "it's most gone now. I knew you'd be pleased to hear that, so, me bein' stayin' along of Cousin Phœbe on a visit, I asked her to bring me here. It's queer, ain't it, as the lady should be my cousin, but so 'tis."

"Lor!" exclaimed Mrs. Gripps, staring at Phœbe in great astonishment, "that accounts for it. If you've found fine relations, that accounts for it, of course."

“You are mistaken, Mrs. Gripps,” Phœbe said, quietly, while Fib made her way into the back kitchen to have a look at that also, “if you mean Fib’s improvement, her respectability, and happy life: it is her own unfailing courage and forbearance, her faith, and hope, and charity, that ‘thinks no evil,’ and is ‘long-suffering’ and patient always, that accounts for it; you may be sure of that.”

They followed Fib to the den that had once been her home. She had her back to them as she stood in the doorway of the wretched cellar; when she turned round it would be with some expression of disgust and loathing, with some hard word for the life led by two little children in a place like that; Mrs. Gripps felt sure of that. But no such thing; when Fib turned round it was to say,—

“Lor, how happy me and Don was

here ! I'm glad I've seen it again. It ain't not to say comfortable, nor very clean, but it was home then, and we was together, and we knowed no better."

"What better could you know than the affection for one another, and the contented spirit that kept you happy? What better could you know than the love, and faith, and trust in God, that made you happy even in a place like this, my little Fib?" said Phœbe, speaking more for the benefit of Mrs. Gripps than to the child herself; "still, you must own if it *were* 'comfortable and clean' it would not be the worse for that," she added, smiling.

After a few more words with the woman of the house, and after Fib had said again how pleased she was to see her, and how much she hoped she bore her no ill-will for the trouble she and Don had given once, they went away, not without

leaving a token of their visit that delighted the heart of Mrs. Gripps, and made her quite sincere when she warmly begged them to come and see her whenever they felt inclined.

But as they walked down the narrow, dirty street, so familiar to Fib, so much, like home, so full of memories of her own childhood and that of little Don, the child said again, and said it with her eyes full of tears,—

“Ain’t there *nothing* we can do? I’m that sorry for ’em, Cousin Phoebe.”

And, after all, *had* Fib done nothing?

A day or two later the broken area steps were put to rights; there was actually the sight and smell of whitewash in the grimy rooms; there was actually somewhere in the brain of Mrs. Gripps a dim remembrance of Fib having said long ago that cleanliness was next to godliness. Godliness might be far off

still, but it was nearer, surely, when the rooms were clean ; nearer yet when four out of the five sacks, that did duty for beds in the back-kitchen, were turned out, and one lodger only living there, and that lodger asked only a fair rent. Nearer than ever when, the room being clean, Mrs. Gripps bethought her to clean herself, and put on a decent dress, and came up her area steps one Sunday morning.

The neighbours stared, and asked, "Whatever was she after now ? Where-ever was she going dressed like that ? "

To which Mrs. Gripps, with a fine air of virtue, replied by asking to be told where else a decent woman should be going except to church.

"The place is that heathenish, as it do appear to me you all forget there's such a day as Sunday in the week," said Mrs. Gripps, her nose in the air, and

her head held very high, but a secret trembling in her heart at this new thing she was about to do—at this new wish of hers to learn, if she could, the secret that would make life happy even in a home like hers.

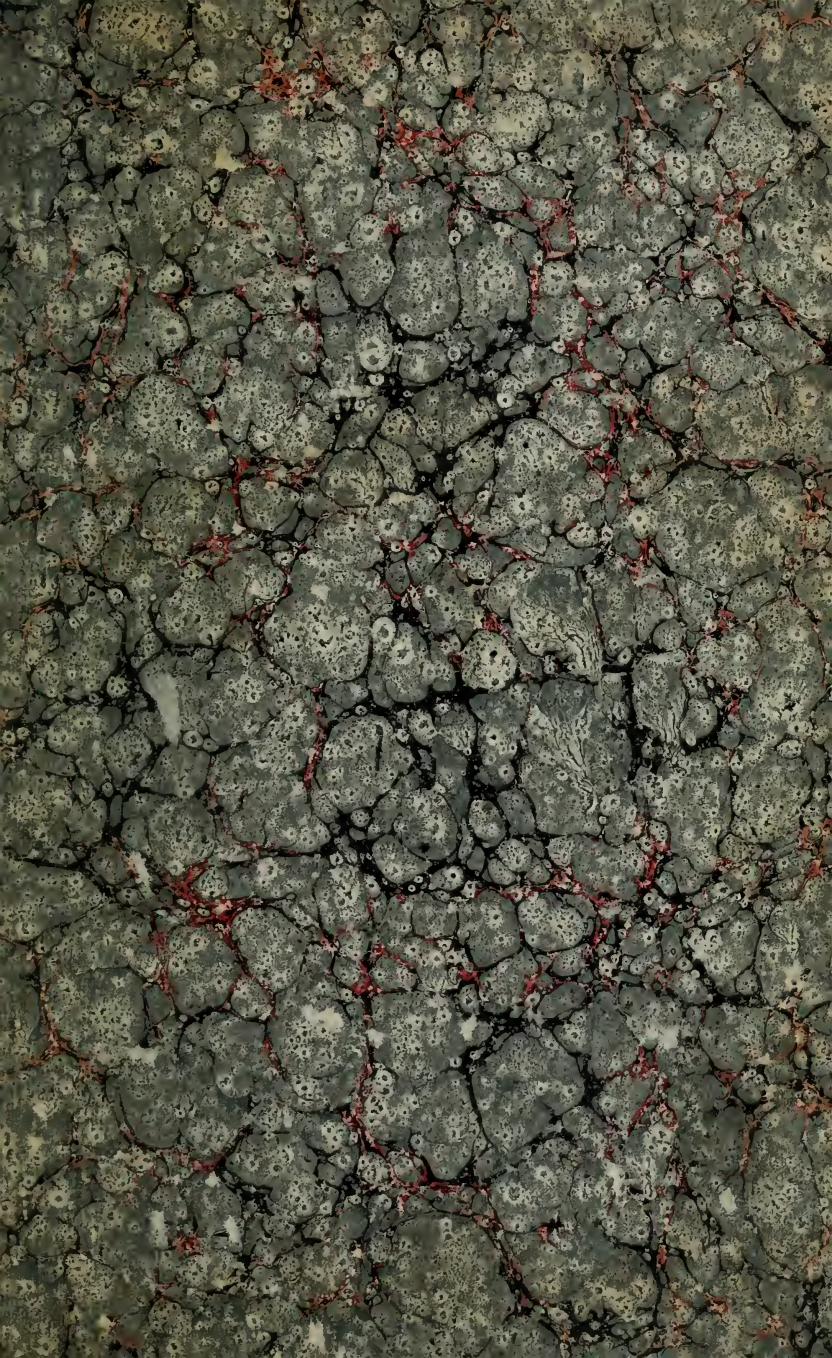
Had Fib done nothing quite, or had she, while utterly unconscious of doing anything at all, done what she could?

And Phœbe? Whether in this change-ful world there will be any further changes in her fortunes, who can say? But, of one thing we may be sure, there never will be any change in her. Her husband takes her each year to Cal-minster, where the lilac her father planted blossoms every spring at Gideon's door. Edmund Blunt's name is over the shop in Grove Street still, but every good work carried on in his native town bears witness to the change in him and his wife. In particular, any appeal for

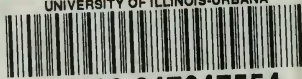
the benefit in any way of little children, is responded to by them at once. In their chastened hearts the image of their dead child never fades ; in the peace of their home, their forbearance with one another, the love and confidence they show to Tim, and their care for his highest interest, may be seen the traces of sorrow that yet brought happiness in its train. For they *are* happier, all of them—happier for learning slowly that religion and life are one, and, apart from one another, nothing either of them ; so much the happier for having learnt through sorrow to understand those words of our Lord, “Your joy no man taketh from you.”

THE END.





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